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Satirical User-Generated Memes as an Effective Source of Political Criticism, Extending Debate and Enhancing Civic Engagement
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The advent of Web 2.0 gradually led to a participatory model of culture, in which individuals are not merely passive consumers of content; instead, they function within collaborative networks in order to actively and critically evaluate, reshape and disseminate media content (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). User-generated content communities, like those of meme users, are manifestations of how this participatory culture operates.

Memes are “self-replicating units of culture” (Dawkins 1999), or “multimodal symbolic artifacts created, circulated, and transferred by countless mediated cultural participants” (Milner 2013b, p.2359). Memes are characterized by some key attributes; they evolve through remixes and commentary and spread through homogeneous communities (Bauckhage 2011). Additionally, memes are rapidly created and distributed, reaching an extended audience without being limited by geographic boundaries; they also have the ability to focus on “seemingly unimportant – but highly shareable – sound bites” (Nasri 2012). Lastly, memes heavily depend on intertextuality, relating not only to each other, but to popular culture at large (Shifman 2014). Memes emerge for a variety of topics, ranging from commentary on news and events to personal experiences. The focus of this project, though, is on political memes.

At the crossroads of information and seriousness and light-hearted entertainment, political memes have become increasingly prevalent in the last few years, with even the President of the United States joining in; in 2012, Barack Obama announced he would be available on Reddit for an “AMA”, an internet slang term and acronym for “Ask Me Anything” (Tsukayama 2012). After the completion of the AMA session, Obama playfully added that he found the experience “NOT BAD!” (Obama 2012). His seemingly ordinary comment was a direct reference to the famous
“Not Bad” Face meme, which features the President himself and is typically used to denote a positive response to an event that exceeded one’s expectations (KnowYourMeme 2011a).

Memes are employed primarily for entertainment purposes, yet little is known about their actual role in politics. Much like other products of popular culture, political memes are often discarded as devoid of any political significance, regarded as trivial artifacts whose sole purpose is to entertain. However, acts of remix and circulation, like those taking place within meme communities, should not be taken lightly, as they mold the cultural and political landscape (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). Memes can be seen as a “(post)modern folklore” (Shifman 2014), and thus offer fertile ground for academic research. The focus of this thesis, then, is on specific category of political memes, that of satirical user-generated memes.

Research Questions

The main question I will address in this project is related to the function of memes as a form of modern, user-generated satire. In particular, the central issue I will explore is whether memes can indeed serve as an effective source of political criticism. Can memes satirizing politics be considered as a manifestation of actual political criticism, or is their generation and diffusion solely a matter of entertainment? If such memes are indeed an effective source of political criticism, can they potentially enhance civic engagement and open up the political realm, or do they trivialize politics? These questions will be discussed in the final chapter of this project.

However, in order to answer these fundamental questions, it is necessary to first examine two secondary aspects; who produces such memes, who disseminates them,
and what is their motivation for doing so? Moreover, how exactly is satire constructed through those memes? These questions will be addressed in chapters 1 and 2 respectively.

**Methodology**

In order to address the aforementioned questions, I followed a mixed-method approach. During the initial stages of this project, I heavily relied on secondary research on the relationship between politics and popular culture, satire and user-generated content. In order to determine who creates and shares satirical political memes and why, I conducted an online focus group. Focus groups are a good strategy for “understanding people’s attitudes and behaviour”, and they offer flexibility in the question design and follow-up (Wimmer and Dominick 2010); in the case of satirical political memes, the motivation behind their creation and dissemination is complex and multi-faceted, thus making focus groups an ideal method for its exploration. Focus groups were selected not only due to the wealth of information they provide, but also because they are ideal for the discussion of topics about which people have strong opinions or deem sensitive, like politics and humour (Donley 2012, Wimmer and Dominick 2010).

Another important factor was interactivity; memes are generated and diffused within interactive communities, and I sought to tap into this by providing a responsive, interactive environment for the discussion. This group dynamic that exists in meme communities is also a core element of focus groups (Donley 2012). The focus groups were conducted online through Google Hangout, a choice that was partly a matter of practicality (since participants came from various areas in the United States, Canada and Denmark). More importantly, since the memes discussed
are products of the internet, discussing them within their natural environment with the people that create and share them, internet users, seemed ideal. The use of web cameras allowed me to compensate for the lack of face to face interaction, as I had access to verbal cues, like tone of voice, and non-verbal ones, like body language and facial expressions. Although participants may seek to dominate the discussion in focus groups, a successful moderator can limit such disruptive behaviour (Wimmer and Dominick 2010).

In order to examine how satire is constructed through memes, I selected and analysed a sample of still image memes from the image macro category, based on their simplicity, longevity and popularity (evident by the multiple variations they sparked). Image macros are essentially images with overlaid text, and they were selected for multiple reasons; they are the oldest, simplest and most wide-spread online meme category, and they are snackable images that are easy to share with a simple tweet or Facebook post (Owens 2012). Image macros are also the easiest to create, as opposed to complex photoshop memes or video memes; as a result, image macros are more inclusive and accessible, and enable a greater segment of the population to create content. Their format is simple and they can “communicate meanings and ideas easily and quickly, all within just a single frame” (Tay 2012, p.11). The memes selected reflect satire in both democratic and non-democratic settings, with a focus on prominent political figures. However, their number is limited, due to time and space constraints.

**Literature Review and Objectives**

The relationship between aspects of popular culture and politics has been thoroughly examined from multiple perspectives. Baym (2008), Van Zoonen (2005)
and Street (1997) argued that popular culture and politics are inextricably linked—they claimed that entertainment can enhance political involvement and provide a way of understanding politics. Street, Inthorn and Scott (2013) argued that popular culture texts offer points of engagement with politics. Popular culture in the form of satirical television and its relationship with politics has been extensively studied, indicating that such programming can lead to informed, critical and active citizens (Jones 2010; Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009; Foy 2009). Ample research is also available on user-generated content, a category that encompasses memes as well; Van Dijck (2009) argued that digital participants display enhanced cultural citizenship, while she also differentiated between varying levels of engagement. Similarly, Li et al. (2007) examined different degrees of engagement with content. Shao (2009) presented a more simplified ladder of engagement, while he also examined the motivation behind content creation. Further analysis of the motivation behind content creation was conducted by Leung (2009), who linked it to notions of empowerment and civic engagement.

Despite the increasing prevalence of memes, there is currently a lack of comprehensive research on them; Shifman (2014) outlined meme categories, as well as their role in digital culture, before identifying them as modes of political participation. Bauckhage (2011) analyzed the way memes spread, and Knobel and Lankshear (2007) discussed the qualities that render memes successful. Mitlner (2011) studied the appeal of the LOLCats meme series, arguing they satisfy the human need of self-expression and belonging, while Vickery (2014) examined Confession Bear memes. Even less research is available on the relationship between memes and politics; Milner (2013a, 2013b) explored memes as a form of public
discourse about politics with regards to the Occupy Wall Street movement, while Tay (2012) focused on humorous political memes as a manifestation of non-serious play.

However, no research has been conducted on memes as a form of political satire, and little is known about the people that generate and spread them, or the reasons why they do so. Consequently, the objectives of this dissertation are two-fold; firstly, to contribute to a better understanding of internet culture and memes overall, as well as to highlight a largely neglected area, that of satirical political memes and their importance to politics.
CHAPTER 1.

Memes as Satire: Meme Users & Their Motivations
A Brief Overview of the History of Satire: from Ancient to Digital

Although seemingly humorous, satire is essentially an attack on a person or an institution (Schutz 1977); it is an attack on evil based on comedic devices, combining the pleasures of humour and the morality of social critique (Coletta 2009). Satire has historically been used as “a means of discrediting those in authority” (Cameron 1993, p.6), and it has taken various forms, ranging from pamphlets, novels, poems, caricatures, films and songs to user-generated memes. Despite its continuous historical presence, satire changes over time, as it reflects the mentality of the period during which it is created (Cameron 1993; Da Silva and Garcia 2012). In this section, I will briefly address the historical progress of satire. Due to space constraints, an overview of core developments in the long history of satire will be provided, then focusing on digital satire and memes.

The roots of satire can be traced back to antiquity, but there are various interpretations regarding its origins; satyr Greek plays, the Roman Saturnalia festivities, formal verse of the Renaissance are all possible origins (Da Silva and Garcia 2012). Horace, credited with the formal invention of literary satire, believed it “bridged the gulf between philosophy and the general public”, while its purpose was fundamentally didactic (Schutz 1997p.50). In medieval times, a jester had freedom to satirize, albeit within the controlled environment of a court, while in the Renaissance, satire emerged as having a social function to expose vice (Da Silva and Garcia 2012). During the Enlightenment, it was believed that human faults could be corrected through the use of art as a reflection of society; by recognizing their ridiculousness through satire, people would ultimately rectify their behaviour (Coletta 2009). Restoration satire flourished, with Dryden’s 1693 “Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire” remaining the most important theoretical work in English
satire (Griffin 1994; Quintero 2007). The 18th century saw satire expand to a wider range of topics, including politics and social issues, instead of only human weakness, as was the norm until then; the works of Voltaire, Cervantes and Swift are core examples (Da Silva and Garcia 2012). Satire continued to mature, driven by the socio-political changes of the time and the discovery of the New World; Twain’s works, considered as the beginning of American satire, signify the maturation of satire (Da Silva and Garcia 2012; Quintero 2007). In the 1900s, satire returned to its classical roots in terms of format and emphasis; satirists “voice a dystopian view of their reality and perceived future, deconstructing modern utopias as well as favouring technology and the mechanical as satiric objects” (Da Silva and Garcia 2012, p.92). Orwell and Huxley embodied the satirist as a “cautionary prophet”, highlighting the weaknesses of utopian, idealistic ideas of progress (Da Silva and Garcia 2012, p.92).

Nowadays, satire is associated mostly with popular television shows, such as Saturday Night Live, The Colbert Report and The Daily Show (Becker 2014). Serious political satire on television appeared only after 2000, with The Daily Show with Jon Stewart; until then, political humour focused on impersonations, thus refraining from an actual critique of politicians and providing harmless skits (Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009). Shows that demonstrated biting satire followed, including classic South Park. “That’s my Bush” and “Lil’Bush”, portraying George W. Bush as a dim-witted and lethargic president, are characteristic examples of television satire (Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009).

Digital Satire

Political criticism and satire expanded online in the Web 2.0 era, and satire on the internet has taken various forms, including satirical blogs, YouTube channels, and
satirical websites. Most notably, faux news websites like The Onion, Bean Soup Times, the Daily Courant and The Spoof produce fake, satirical news stories. Such satirical articles both focus on real facts and fictional ones, often providing parodies of traditional newspapers and websites. The purpose of such fake news is to question “the logic and integrity of contemporary journalistic practices”, while it also successfully satirizes politicians and institutions (Reilly 2012, p.258). More than mere satire, such news “re-present issues of great civic importance” (Reilly 2012, p.273). The prevalence of such fake news recently prompted Facebook to mark such articles as satire, a move that has been criticized as “eliminating the unhelpful friction of thought”, no longer allowing people to reflect and question the content they consume (Mahdawi 2014).

In a way, memes are a continuation of caricatures, a form of satire prevalent in England in the 1700s and in France after the Revolution; with technological advancements that allowed easier printing, caricatures and satirical comic strips started appearing in newspapers, a practice that continues to this day (Da Silva and Garcia 2012). Due to a shift towards visual content, memes satirizing politics grew in prevalence and popularity. By 2012, memes had become so widespread and pertinent to politics, that elections in the digital age could no longer be complete without an ample, incessant supply of DIY memes (Ackerman 2012).

Who Creates Political Memes and Why?

Despite the growing popularity of memes, there has been no comprehensive research specifically on meme creators and sharers; little is known about who creates or spreads memes and why. However, extensive research has been conducted on user-generated content, which can also be employed in the examination of memes.
According to Van Dijck (2009), there are few active content creators and multiple levels of participation. Participation in the case of user-generated content does not necessarily involve active contribution – in fact, there are multiple levels of participation online, according to which users can be categorized; creators, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators, and inactives (Li et al. 2007). Critics are those who often rate and comment, while collectors use social bookmarking services and tag webpages (Li et al. 2007). Joiners are users of social networking sites and they often engage in activities such as sharing, while spectators, mostly consisting of women, consume content usually without creating their own (Li et al. 2007). In the case of memes, people creating them fall into the creator category, while those who disseminate the content are from the creator, critic, collector, and joiner categories.

Shao (2009) offered a more simplified model, arguing that individuals engage with user-generated content in mainly three ways; by consuming it, by participating in it, and by actively producing it. Consuming refers to merely viewing content generated by others, while participating is multi-faceted; it involves “both user-to-user interaction and user-to-content interaction”, such as sharing, rating, and commenting (Shao 2009, p.9). There are, then, consumers-observers, participants, and creators, and various factors determine in which of those categories users will ultimately belong.

According to Hargittai and Walejko (2008), an individual’s socioeconomic status plays a crucial role in shaping his creative activity. Content creation and sharing online constitute advanced uses of information technologies, which naturally require a specific skills-set. This web-savvy requirement enables those from a higher socioeconomic status to more easily create and spread content online, thus creating a participation divide (Hargittai and Walejko 2008). As far as memes are concerned, the creation of online content is facilitated by the availability of sites allowing “do it
yourself production” (Van Dijck 2009, p.44); for instance, memes can easily be created through websites like Meme Generator, Quickmeme, and MemeCreator, which allow users to simply add their own captions to popular meme templates. This is an indication that meme creation has become accessible to more people, as photo editing and visual manipulation skills are no longer required. However, familiarity with computers and internet use are pre-requisites for content creation. In reality, pursuing creative activities online remains “unequally distributed by social background” (Hargittai and Walejko 2008, p.252). Research has also indicated that gender plays a role in content creation and distribution, with women being less likely to share content online (Hargittai and Walejko 2008).

Since the focal point of this assignment is political memes, it is essential to also take into consideration the broad factors affecting digital politics overall. There is a positive correlation between internet access and online political participation, although there is substantial political activity online even in countries with low levels of internet access – however, in such cases, political interactions online are usually restricted to a small, educated segment of the population from the lower or upper class (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012). The media system of a country, as regulated by different regimes, are also important, as they affect “the level of partisanship permitted; a commercial versus a public character; and the level of professionalism, which may affect the degree to which the public trusts the media’s reporting” (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012, p.247).

In order to determine who exactly creates and spreads political memes online, I conducted an online focus group, as discussed in the methodology section. Although no sweeping conclusions can be drawn based on the information I acquired, those focus group sessions provided me with some insight into meme creation and
distribution. The eleven individuals that participated in my focus group were all aged between 18 and 29, which came as no surprise since content creation is “a very popular activity among young age groups” (Wunsch-Vincent and Vickery 2007). More specifically, I was expecting my participants to belong to this age group, since research has indicated that comedy is the favourite genre of young adults (Madden 2007). This “dot.net generation” of 18-28 year olds “clearly manifests less involvement in traditional politics” (Dahlgren 2009, p.109); they are less likely to see democracy as something that includes obligations, and their motivation to gain political knowledge to promote political engagement is low (Dahlgren 2009). Satirical memes naturally attract young people; in fact, satire has “a degree of authenticity to younger citizens” because it seems less closely “aligned with the manufactured realities of politicians, advertisers, and news media construct” (Jones 2010, p.246).

The language of satire seems more authentic due to its edgy and anti-authority style, or perhaps due to its entertaining yet critical attributes (Jones 2010). For young people, “less agenda-driven language offers a respite from so much of the manipulative political language” that surrounds them (Jones 2010, p. 246). Satirical language is in a way, a generational language, a disguise of the seriousness and hope young people have towards the cynical politics of those in power (Jones 2010). Over the course of the focus groups, it emerged that political meme users were not an amorphous group. Instead, they can be grouped into three distinct categories; political meme creators, political meme sharers, and political meme viewers.

Types of Satirical Meme Users: Creators, Distributors, Viewers

The first category, political meme creators, includes all those who produce their own content. Individuals in this group were overwhelmingly male, aged from 19 to 29, and most are college educated. Seven out of the eleven participants were men,
although that does not necessarily mean that women are less interested in political memes. In the case of my research, the choice of respondents was largely a matter of self-selection and a result of online posts in meme forums. However, existing research, albeit on online videos and not memes, does suggest that men are more likely than women to watch political content (Purcell 2013). Moreover, men are more likely than women to actively consume comedic content online, such as memes (Madden 2007). Out of the eleven participants, only three belonged to the creator category, echoing the findings of other researchers discussed above and confirming that only a small segment of online users create original content.

The second category, political meme sharers, includes all those who share political memes with others. People in this group also comment on and rate others’ content. The largest number of participants belonged to this group – 6 out of 11, or 54% of participants. In this case too, men outnumbered women; the four men were between the ages of 18 to 29, while the women were from 22 to 27. It is important to note here that meme creators are often meme sharers as well, and they both create and distribute political memes, while sharers never create content.

The last category, that of political meme viewers, represented the smallest portion of the sample; only 2 out of 11 participants claimed their engagement with memes was limited to viewing and never involved sharing or creating content. This group included a 19 year old man and a 28 year old woman; the man is currently working towards a bachelor’s degree, while the woman is a professional graphic designer.
Motivation Behind Different Types of Meme Usage

These three groups exhibit significant differences in the reasons behind their online behaviour, and “different uses are driven by different motivations” (Shao 2009, p.9). People produce their own content for self-expression and self-actualization purposes, both of which also enable them to construct their individual identity (Shao 2009). Moreover, they aim to solicit the response of others and trigger participation (Shao 2009). The idea of self-expression was crucial to the meme creators in my focus group, and it was cited as their primary reason for creating political memes satirizing politics. By creating original memes or remixing existing ones, they are able to both express themselves, fulfilling their self-expression needs, and belong to the larger community of meme consumers; in this way, they display a “networked individualism”, being “themselves, together” (Shifman 2014, p.34). For this group, both self-expression and the need to belong to a community are fulfilled, and both constitute core motivations for meme creation.

Another motivation that was passionately expressed was that of exposing what they saw as immoral, unworthy, or simply not right. Political meme creators in the focus group insisted that they worked to unmask “rotten” politicians or to raise awareness about situations they deemed as in need of change and improvement. They also create satirical memes in order to promote the political causes or candidates they support. For instance, a creator in my focus group created memes satirizing those criticizing Obamacare; in this way, he also aimed to illustrate the irrationality of the attack against a national health care plan and, actually, to defend Obamacare as a concept. The creation of such memes attracts the audience’s attention and sparks discussions on political issues, as the ones that create and spread their own content “have the ability to set the agenda of public discussions and debates” (Hargittai and
This gives content creators the ability to create “talking points”, “offering people new perspectives” (Nasri 2012). This freedom to create talking points on politics comes with an unprecedented autonomy, since the anonymity internet users enjoy allows them to freely create satirical memes without claiming their authorship (Nasri 2012; Davison 2012). Although meme creators admitted that having fun was also important, it was certainly not one of the key motivations behind meme creation. Their predominant purpose is to use satirical humor as public commentary, exposing what they see as dysfunctional politics or defending what they see as just, in a process of self-expression.

Moreover, those who actively participate and share content do so for social interaction and community building (Shao 2009). Through shared humour, they create a collective, in-group identity (Hart 2008), as well as a friendly, open environment of acceptance despite the interpersonal nature of computers (Baym 1995). Sharing humorous content like memes in particular, can be employed to create a shared group identity and solidarity; this solidarity, as we will see in the next chapter, is boosted through references to common knowledge, such as popular culture (Baym 1995). The sharers spread political memes, mostly with close friends and people they know on social media, with a purpose to enhance their social connections. This is what Shifman (2014) defined as the social logic of participation, arguing that people take part in the construction of social networks “demonstrating an enduring human longing for communality” (p.33). This group shares political memes that others might find funny or interesting, in an attempt to both enhance their social bonds with others and to seem knowledgeable and boost their self-image (Berger and Milkman 2012). Sharing here is important for social validation purposes, and it increases group solidarity; since people share content that invokes strong emotional responses, like
political content, having a shared emotional experience with others can increase
closeness and establish stronger social bonds (Guadagno et al, 2013).

Lastly, people who consume user-generated content seek information-
gathering and entertainment (Shao 2009). For this last group, the viewers of political
memes, the main motivation is entertainment, finding a diversion from the hardships
of daily struggles, and mood management. This group consumes political memes
mostly in order to relax and have a laugh, and does so without an intention to seek an
in-depth meaning in them. The political meme viewers generally agreed that political
memes might encourage citizen engagement with politics, yet they also argued that
they do not always think of that potential; in particular, they claimed that at times they
even suspend their critical thinking while consuming political memes, seeing the
activity solely as entertainment.

People in the sharing and consuming categories fulfill their social interaction
and entertainment needs, while they also reinforce the creative tendencies of the
creators. Creators have their self-actualization needs fulfilled by gaining recognition;
this stimulates the cycle of meme production, encouraging further content creation in
this circular model (Leung 2009; Shao 2009). All three groups mentioned
entertainment as a shared motivation, citing it as an important driver for creating or
consuming political memes; this resonates with research indicating that motivation for
engaging with popular culture, such as memes, includes escapism and entertainment
(Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). Although this factor was mentioned by all three, it
seemed to be less important to creators and more important to sharers and viewers. It
is important to note that memes may also function as democratic subversion in non-
democratic settings, a means of protesting against oppression (Shifman 2014). The
participants in my focus group were all from democratic environments – as a result, meme creation as resistance to oppression was not mentioned as a motivation.
CHAPTER 2.

The Construction of Satire Through Memes
In the previous chapter, I provided a brief overview of the history of satire, tracing its roots to antiquity and following its development to the present digital era. Through this analysis, I argued that certain political internet memes represent another manifestation of satire, and are in fact a continuation of a long-established practice. Since those memes are a form of user-generated satire, I also attempted to identify who creates and shares such content online. Moreover, I explored the motivation behind the creation and dissemination of such content.

In this chapter, I will continue my analysis, focusing on the memes themselves. In particular, I will demonstrate how political humour is constructed in satirical user-generated memes, through an examination of the structure and format of a carefully selected sample of memes. However, it is important to note that the nature of humour is highly ambiguous, and far from universal; as Kuipers (2006) insightfully explained, what qualifies as good humour “differs from group to group, from person to person, and from moment to moment” (p.1). Therefore, it is essential to first examine the numerous variables affecting the way in which it is received.

Factors Affecting Humour Reception

There are several factors affecting people’s perception of what exactly is funny; in fact, it is an area that seems to be influenced by linguistic, geographical, sociocultural and personal limitations (Chiaro 1992). Variables affecting humour appreciation include, but are not limited to, one’s gender, educational background, age, ethnicity, and cultural background (Kuipers 2006). Moreover, there are also individual differences that affect humour perception, such as personal experiences (Kuipers 2006). Differences in those variables are linked to notions of taste and personhood, and by illustrating our sense of humour, we simultaneously indicate what we find
important in ourselves, people around us, and in social life at large (Kuipers 2010). Although very personal, taste also reveals whether one belongs to one group or another; in fact, taste differences serve as a “direct social delimitation”, both between cultures and between groups within the same culture (Kuipers 2006, p.12).

Ethnicity and cultural background seem to play a major role in humour reception. Cultural background shapes cultural boundaries, which in turn influence one’s sense of humour; as a result, something seen as funny in one culture, might be wildly inappropriate or shocking in another (Kuipers 2006). In her analysis of humour ingredients, Kuipers (2010) argued that incongruity is of vital importance in determining what is funny. In particular, she explained that humour is based on a “juxtaposition of mismatched elements”, which often involves the “transgression of social norms, or the breaking of established social patterns” (p.221). Perceptions of what is incongruous are actively shaped by cultural background and ethnicity, as there are “culture-specific constructions of order” in each culture (Kuipers 2010, p.221). At this point, it is important to note that religion is also included here; different religions have different levels of tolerance for humour, especially for what they perceive as acceptable or not. The standardizing of jokes, partly a result of the culture of oral storytelling, has resulted in some universally known techniques or subjects of humour – however, differences still exist in terms of style, namely tone, presentation, and purport (Kuipers 2006, p.11).

As far as the educational background is concerned, it seems that highly educated individuals “have less sense of humour” than those less educated (Kuipers 2006, p.43). In her discussion of the humour divide, Kuipers (2006) explained that this might be due to the fact that higher education allows people to be more critical, giving them more to “reject and look down upon” (p.79).
Friedman (2014) explored different comedy styles in connection to cultural capital, and his findings illustrate a clear distinction between two types of comic appreciation; people with high cultural capital, who are more educated and of a higher social class, prefer “clever, dark and inventive comedy” (p.68). On the other hand, people with low cultural capital place emphasis on physicality and the importance of laughter (Friedman 2014).

In particular, individuals with high cultural capital described the comedy they privileged in terms of sophistication; they favour intelligent, complex, and clever comedy (Friedman 2014). Rather than viewing comedy as an ephemeral, escapist experience, they expect it to be challenging, memorable, and thought-provoking (Friedman 2014). Moreover, for such individuals, comedy is valuable only if it offers something more than entertainment – when “its purpose is complex, and in the end, serious” (Mills 2005, cited in Friedman 2014, p.69). People with high cultural capital underline the concept of difficulty in good comedy, insisting that a degree of knowledge and effort should be required for the audience to understand and appreciate it; this effort, in turn, results in a sense of achievement (Friedman 2014). Comedy is seen as a form of art and a pedagogical tool, and its core benefit is its ability to make the audience think critically (Friedman 2014).

Considering how comedy in this case is didactic in nature, it comes as no surprise that it is not necessarily expected to be pleasurable; on the contrary, people with high cultural capital are more open to comedy that is uncomfortable (Friedman 2014). This belief, echoing theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer, is inextricably linked with the notion of originality; people with high cultural capital demonstrate a strong preference comedy that is original both in its form, as well as its content (Friedman 2014). As a result, people in this category often reject the prosaic, considering popular comedy as
simplistic, easily predictable, and not intellectually stimulating (Friedman 2014, p.73). Instead, they tend to favour comedy that has “an explicit social role and political message” (Friedman 2014, p.75). For audiences with high cultural capital, the manner in which humour relates to “social inequalities and wider structures of power” is a fundamental consideration (Friedman 2014, p.76). Comedy that satirizes those in positions of power is highly valued, while the mockery of vulnerable groups is not tolerated, as it is considered offensive and distasteful (Friedman 2014, p.88). Although such individuals recognize the importance of some laughter in enjoying comedy, they do not regard it as a valid tool for determining humour quality (Friedman 2014).

The comedic style preferred by people with high cultural capital is in sharp contrast with that of people with low cultural capital, typically people who are less educated and from lower classes. In this case, laughter is seen as the most essential criterion in comedy; furthermore, comedy that stirs up negative emotions is viewed as bad comedy, a view diametrically opposed to that of people with high cultural capital (Friedman 2014). Additionally, people with low cultural capital tend to define comedy as an essentially escapist experience, aiming to offer light-hearted laughter as a form of counterbalance for the struggles of everyday life (Friedman 2014).

People with low cultural capital expressed a preference for clever comedy, a view that resonates with that of people with high cultural capital. However, the two groups assigned definitions that greatly varied with regards to clever comedy; those with high cultural capital defined clever comedy in terms of its complexity. On the other hand, people with low cultural capital associated clever comedy mostly with the comedian’s delivery, emphasizing his skill to “construct humour from everyday life” (Friedman 2014, p.80). Moreover, puns, word play and innuendos are also appreciated, as well as
observational and physical comedy (Friedman 2014). For people with low cultural capital, good comedy is not required to fulfil intellectual functions; in fact, comedy that aims to propel people to think is seen as tedious and frustrating (Friedman 2014).

Age also greatly affects humour reception, and it is the second most important variable influencing one’s humour appreciation style after cultural capital. In particular, older individuals oppose the “coarsening” of humour (Kuipers 2006, p.94). Older people also demonstrate a rejection of humour that is perceived as “shocking, cruel or crude”, as well as what they view as excessive, redundant swearing (Friedman 2014, p.87). On the contrary, the young often express a preference for hard jokes (Kuipers 2006). In general, the highbrow comedy preferred by those with high cultural capital is more prevalent among those younger than 44 (Friedman 2014).

Humour of course is not only dependent on the audience and its characteristics, but also on the context, as “much humour is situationally dependent”; what might be perceived as humorous in one case might seem inappropriate or, at best, interesting in another (Meyer 2000, p.316). In certain cases, the content of the joke is not the most important aspect; instead, what matters most is that it was “told by this person in this situation” (Zijderveld 1983, p.3). The social aspect of humour is of vital importance; all humor is preemptively a communicative activity (Lynch 2002). A joke is only perceived when it is a part of a social experience, and it is only meaningful within a social context (Douglas 1968). As Kuipers (2006) explained, a joke is a predominantly social phenomenon, in the sense that it is told multiple times by different people while being “continuously redesigned in the interaction” (p.6).

Since communication participants differ in many ways, namely in their knowledge of social scripts, modes of communication, humour appreciation style, and personal
experiences, it is only natural that humour varies from group to group and from situation to situation (Meyer 2000, p.316). Despite all those situational variables, internet memes have been described as a “phenomenon that transgresses social and cultural boundaries” (Bauckhage 2011, p.42). Visual content has the potential to easily cross linguistic and national borders, especially with the help of modern technology, a fact that partly explains the dissemination and success of humorous memes across the world (Shifman 2014). Memes are seen as powerful but often unnoticed agents of globalization, with the community creating and spreading them described as both global and local; global, in the sense that its members are spread all around the world and aware of meme formulas and conventions, and local, in that these members modify memes, adding their own versions (Shifman 2014). This community of meme enthusiasts creates content that is both universal and specific, balancing the expected memes patterns with personal expression and blending fixity and novelty; in this way, memes function as a “media lingua franca, where individuals can express themselves in an understood vernacular” (Milner 2013a, p.2). This media lingua franca is based on an understanding of internet culture, as well as popular culture. Understanding memes, thus, is following “broadly accepted aesthetic practices and touching on resonant cultural moments” (Milner 2013a, p.2).

The Construction of Satire Through Memes: Meme Analysis

In the following section, I will illustrate examples of political memes involving such resonant cultural moments, exploring the ways in which they satirize modern politics. The sample selected includes memes satirizing politics in democratic and non-democratic settings, in order to provide a complete, balanced demonstration of how exactly humour is constructed in both cases. The texts discussed in this chapter all belong to the popular still image category, with a focus on image macros; the
The reasons why only image macros were selected have been outlined in the methodology section. Image macros follow standard macro aesthetics, demonstrating an emphasis on the visual, the use of a white font, and the “set up/punch line format” (Milner 2013b, p.2365). These image macros are usually in the form of a political figure or situation, with an overlaid bold caption (Tay 2012, p.57). The font commonly used for such image macros is “Impact”; the juxtaposition between the thick, bold letters and the sarcastic content illustrates the humorous intent of meme creators.

Although the content of memes is sparse and emphasis is placed on humour (Milner 2013b, p.2365), the following discussion will illustrate how satirical memes are in fact an expression of citizenship, drawing from a shared language based on popular culture. In order to discursively analyze memes, I will follow the model proposed by Knobel and Lankshear (2007); first, I will discuss the referential meaning they have, such as the information that they include and how it is conveyed. Then, I will also explore the contextual aspect, discussing the knowledge it provides about the people it features. Lastly, I will discuss the ideological aspect, looking at the deeper ideas and positions the meme conveys.

**Satirical Memes: Non-democratic Settings**

To begin with, memes satirizing politics in a non-democratic setting will be discussed. One of the most popular targets of meme satire is North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, often portrayed as a petulant child threatening the world with his nuclear weapons, in a desperate attempt to demand respect and establish his authority. Kim Jong-Un is frequently the object of satire, with a plethora of memes focusing on his appearance, painting the image of a perpetually hungry individual who is willing to start a war to satisfy his voracious, wolf-like appetite. However, despite references to
his weight or hair, he is most commonly attacked due to his position as an imposed, oppressive leader who has no respect for human rights.

The first Kim Jong-Un memes appeared shortly after the elusive North Korean leader succeeded his father, in 2011. According to KnowYourMeme (2012a), on December 19th, 2012, a meme called “Hungry Kim Jong Un” was established, featuring Kim Jong-Un talking to one of his generals, reaching the front page of the site in a few hours; the caption was “what do you mean / I can’t eat America” (figure 2.1). This meme soon evolved, now having multiple variations. In most cases, Kim Jong-Un is ridiculed about his weight, though criticism of his policies is also prominent. Figure 2.2 portrays a Kim Jong-Un so cruel he is seen as human flesh-eating; this is an attempt to dehumanize him, and reveal the extent of his perceived evilness. In another variation, (figure 2.3) he is seen discussing his “Hitler mustache”, with the meme creator clearly drawing a parallel between the two leaders, seen as oppressive and violent. This accusation is even more explicit in another meme variation, where Kim explains North Korea is a great place for “Hunan rice”, not human rights (figure 2.4). The intent of the meme creator here is to use word play in order to sarcastically point out the multiple human rights violations the country is notorious for.

Allusions to popular culture are common in memes, since popular culture functions as a common language members of meme internet communities understand and share. In some cases, there are variations of the standard image macro format, such as 4-panes. These memes include a selection of photos, arranged in a way reminiscent of storyboards, so as to emphasize the sequence of events (Tay 2012, p.70). This allows participants to construct narrative sequences, instead of particular moments (Tay 2012, p.70). In figure 2.5, the meme creator has playfully re-created a
Snickers chocolate advertisement; in the original (and sexist) ad, a woman is seen in a men’s locker room, hysterically screaming in panic over her lost deodorant. A football player then gives her a Snickers bar, telling her she acts like a “rock diva” when she is hungry. The woman then transforms into a man, with a voice-over explaining that “you’re not you when you’re hungry”. By eating the Snickers bar, the man transforms into a normal “better” version of himself again, leaving his hysterical, over-reacting self behind. The original images from the ad are used, with a grumpy-looking Kim Jong-Un told he turns into a “warmonger” when he is hungry. The meme creator in this case used the “hungry Kim Jong-Un” theme to ridicule the North Korean leader, attributing his war-waging tendencies to his insatiable appetite. After he eats the chocolate bar, he turns into the popular “Gangnam Style” singer and internet sensation Psy, himself a symbol of popular culture. This can be seen as an internal joke, since it clearly refers to a pop culture hit that became an international phenomenon thanks to the internet.

Humour here can be viewed as an expression of superiority, an idea first expressed by Thomas Hobbes; a person seen as comical is also perceived as inferior, since is deemed inadequate “according to a set of agreed-upon group or societal criteria” (Lynch 2002, p.426). Humor as an expression of superiority can be seen as “either a mechanism of control or a form of resistance” (Lynch 2002, p.426). By ridiculing Kim Jong-Un, the meme creator implies he is inadequate, inferior, and essentially, a threat so unrealistic that is seen as funny; in this way, he clearly expresses his opposition to Kim Jong-Un as a viable political leader. This view of Kim as a meaningless threat is made explicit in figure 2.6 too; here, the creator remixed the famous “the most interesting man in the world” meme, based on the Dos Equis beer. This iconic meme is one of the most resilient ones, first appearing in 2007.
and remaining popular to this day (KnowYourMeme 2010). Here, Kim is seen with a strange grimace, with the caption explaining that “I don’t always threaten the whole world, but when I do, everyone is laughing at me”.

Moreover, Kim is also portrayed as an incapable, inadequate leader who merely inherited his position, again disregarding democratic principles and meritocracy. In figure 2.7, a smiling Kim is seen waving with a triumphant expression, with the caption sarcastically mentioning that nepotism is an easier alternative than working hard. This disregard for democracy is also seen in figures 2.8 and 2.9; one portrays the same, gleeful image of Kim, satirizing his absolute win in his “totally democratic” elections, while the other features a grimacing Kim while referring to the death camps and government propaganda in North Korea. In those cases, humour is based on perceptions of incongruity; the joke here stems from the view that something is “inconsistent with the expected rational nature of the perceived environment”, “irrational, paradoxical, illogical, incoherent, fallacious, or inappropriate” (Lynch 2002, p.428). All those examples essentially serve to criticize Kim as a dictator and defend democratic principles. Although those attacks might showcase varying degrees of seriousness, ranging from weight jokes (that are potentially offensive to all overweight people) to death camp comments, the aim is always to defend democratic values and expose Kim as an unworthy tyrant.

Satirical Memes in Democratic Settings

Although the example of Kim Jong-Un illustrates how users employ image macros to expose an oppressive regime and defend democracy, memes are also used to satirize democratic leaders. Among the most popular memes of the 2012 US presidential elections was “binders full of women”, which remains popular; the
comment was made by Mitt Romney during a debate, in an attempt to demonstrate his
effort to create a gender-balanced cabinet (KnowYourMeme 2012b). The event
initiated thousands of tweets, the Binders Full of Women Tumblr blog, a song, and
numerous memes, initially ridiculing him for his word choice (figures 2.10, 2.11, 2.12
and 2.13).

However, the discussion on “binders full of women” led to more attention on
Romney and his efforts for gender equality in the workplace. His comments were
extensively scrutinized, and it was eventually revealed that “the percentage of women
in senior-level, appointed positions actually declined during Romney’s tenure from
30% to 27.6%” (Boehler 2012). Furthermore, it was revealed that it was not Romney
who actively took steps to add more females to his cabinet – instead, MassGAP, a
women’s group lobbying for more women in leadership positions in the government,
compiled a list of competent female applicants with the purpose of handing it to the
elected governor (Peralta 2012).

Consequently, meme creators responded with an avalanche of satirical memes;
Romney is presented as a candidate that has no respect for women, seeing them as
inferior. In a meme representing him as a player in the popular “Who Wants to be a
Millionaire” television show (a pop culture reference), Romney is portrayed as sexist,
believing women belong in binders, the kitchen, or any place that hinders their
decision-making abilities (figure 2.14). Moreover, his comments about his supposed
initiative to include more women in leadership positions is used in order to expose
him as a liar (figure 2.15); in this meme, Romney is seen wearing a hat, taken from
another famous meme. “Scumbag Steve” (figure 2.16) is a meme used to signify
someone who perceives himself as successful and smart, while in fact he exhibits
behaviour that is immoral or rude (KnowYourMeme 2011b). By adding this
character’s hat to Romney, it is implied that he too exhibits unacceptable, unethical behaviour, in this case by attempting to take credit for an action he did not, in fact, perform.

Romney supporters joined the debate, enriching the discussion with their own variations of memes; in the same way “binders full of women” was the sound bite that stood out from Romney’s answers, Obama and his “you didn’t build that” was also widely discussed and mocked (KnowYourMeme 2012c). Obama uttered that phrase while trying to emphasize the role of the government in enabling the growth of American businesses, highlighting that success is a result of collaborative and not individual effort; the quote sparked a debate on income taxes in the United States, and Republican supporters used it to produce an array of satirical memes (see figure 2.19, 2.20, 2.21). Moreover, the Republican party generated its own memes, portraying Obama laughing at famous inventors, demeaning their individual efforts and telling them they do not deserve recognition for their accomplishments since they “didn’t build that” (see figures 2.22, 2.23). Moreover, the Republican Party used the “We Built This” counter-message for the annual Republican Convention in 2012, clearly responding to Obama’s remark (Pareene 2012).

In some cases, memes are also used as a juxtaposition of two alternatives; for instance, Hilary Clinton, a powerful Democrat, is seen laughing at Romney, whose views are as anachronistic as his binders (figure 2.17). Romney is seen discussing his binders, when Obama, with a comfortable expression on his face, states he actually placed women in positions of power (figure 2.18). This juxtaposition serves as a biting satire, with Romney appearing inadequate compared to his political opponents.
The examples analysed so far have indicated that memes are not only parts of popular culture, but also thrive through popular culture references and intertextuality. Despite the multiple variables affecting humour reception, memes have become an international inside joke, partly due to the pervasiveness and appeal of popular culture. In this chapter, humour construction through memes was discussed, both in democratic and non-democratic settings, with a focus on the structure and format of specific image macro memes. The following chapter will explore the ways in which political memes open the realm of civic engagement and citizenship, particularly as far as young people are concerned.
CHAPTER 3.

Satirical Memes: Implications on Citizenship and Politics
Seriousness, Information and Politics Versus Entertainment and Popular Culture

Political memes that satirize politics are often discarded as trivial and pointless, serving solely entertainment purposes. This position is far from surprising, considering the commonly perceived opposition between popular culture and politics. This alleged opposition is a result of the two contrasting social traditions from which they stem; popular culture is rooted in oral tradition and folklore, while politics springs from modernity and literacy (Van Zoonen 2005). The supposed dichotomy between popular culture and politics was ingrained and bolstered by modernist political discourse; theorists like Adorno, Horkheimer and Putnam castigated popular culture and its “formulaic, repetitive content”, and argued it acted as a distraction from activities that invigorate community bonds and democratic ethos (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013, p.24). Popular culture was seen as having detrimental effects on politics, diminishing it and undermining citizenship; it led to an unsociable existence and a gradual disintegration of social capital, a core prerequisite for a strong democracy (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013; Van Zoonen 2005; Dahlgren 2009).

This modernist legacy dictates a clear-cut division between popular culture and politics, and further establishes entertainment and seriousness as contrasting pairs (Baym 2008). Information is regarded as a vital ingredient of rational thought, while entertainment is seen as inferior, laden with affective qualities (Jones 2010). In particular, vital concepts of entertainment like pleasure, fantasy and immersion are not “easily reconciled with civic virtues, such as knowledge, rationality, detachment, learnedness, or leadership” (Van Zoonen 2005, p.63). However, it is erroneous to hastily dismiss popular culture and the entertainment that accompanies it as making no significant contribution to politics; the political field and that of entertainment do not exist in opposition – instead, the two overlap (Street 1997, Van Zoonen 2005,
Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). The opposition between the two is founded on the fallacious view that entertainment creates passive audiences, while politics creates active, critical citizens (Van Zoonen 2005).

Culture, including the so easily dismissed mainstream culture, is an indispensable part of political life (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). In fact, the relationship between the two is manifested in various ways; politicians commonly attempt to associate themselves with icons of popular culture and interact with celebrities, in the hope that they will gain broader support (Street 1997). Moreover, politicians employ techniques of popular culture to act according to their role; staged events in which they somehow run into ordinary citizens and converse with them are reminiscent of mainstream television shows (Street 1997). This relationship between politics and popular culture has been heavily criticized through a series of negative phrases, including “sound bite politics”, “celebrity politics” and “dumbing down”, and an overall dismissal of “all elements in politics that fall outside the serious realm of information, deliberation, and policy formation” (Van Zoonen 2005, p.143).

Fans-Audiences versus Citizens/Publics

Despite this negativity, politics can be perceived in similar terms to those applied to popular culture. Their purpose is to create an audience who will understand them and side with them; both popular media and politicians strive to create “works of popular fiction which portray credible worlds that will resonate with people’s experiences” (Street 1997, p.60). There are numerous parallels between politics and popular culture, especially in terms of their audiences; fans and citizens. Fans are often dismissed as operating within a world that is “closed off, marginal, a game”,

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However, fans communally engage with popular culture in an active, critical manner (Lewis 2002, Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). In fact, fans engage in activities that are essential in terms of civic engagement; the deliberation, evaluation, creativity, active participation and community-building that they display are all practices that are crucial in political life (Van Zoonen 2005). Both fan communities and political constituencies come to exist as an outcome of performance, and they are similar regarding the activities that make one a member of the community (Van Zoonen 2005). More importantly, they are both based on emotional investments that are inherently connected to rationality and enhance affective intelligence, while they also keep their commitment strong (Van Zoonen 2005; Jones 2010).

Affect in Politics

The affective element that is fundamental in both fan communities and political constituencies is not always embraced in politics, with feelings perceived in a pejorative manner (Hart 2008); traditionally, emotions were seen as “a secondary component of politics, accepted for strategic reasons at best, but worrisome and undermining when taking center stage” (Van Zoonen 2005, p.65). However, public culture is both cognitive and affective (McGuigan 2005). Although passion is seen as opposed to reason and self-control, they both co-exist and interconnect; Dahlgren (2009) insightfully pointed out, “a passion for something suggests a reason for valuing it”, and similarly “a reason for choosing it over other things implies at least some passion for the choice” (p.85). Emotions do not exist in opposition to reason,
and political engagement encompasses affective dimensions (Jones 2010; Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). In fact, “emotion and reason interact to produce a thoughtful and attentive citizenry” (Marcus, Neuman and Mackuen 2000, p.1). It would be paradoxical to disparage the importance of affect in politics, as “to be engaged in something signals not just cognitive attention and some normative stance, but also an affective investment”; that is to say, engagement in politics inherently involves some passion (Dahlgren 2009, p.83).

Popular culture functions primarily through affect, and its relevance to politics is based precisely on this emotional aspect (Street 1997; Van Zoonen 2005). Besides, the significance of entertainment for politics does not lie in its "informative qualities, its appeal to cognitive capacities, or its encouragement of rational deliberation” (Van Zoonen 2005, p.66). The affective potential popular culture offers “helps to organize people’s passion, and as such becomes part of a process of empowerment” (Street 1997, p.166). This affective empowerment leads to the generation of passion, which has emerged as necessary for political engagement. From the analysis so far, popular culture has emerged as inextricably linked to politics; as a result, it should be acknowledged as “an important site for the articulation and exploration of politics” and further explored (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013, p.7).

**Satirical Memes: Citizen Engagement and Inclusive Politics**

Manifestations of politics can be traced not only in the narrow confines of formal politics, but also in popular culture (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). Representations of politics in popular culture offer people a chance to “pick up and confirm a broad sense of politicians and the political process”, while they also “enable
them to express general political reflections and judgments” (Van Zoonen 2005, p.139). Popular culture functions as a language (Street 1997), thus memes can be regarded as a form of expression. Considering the ease with which memes are generated and spread, they offer internet users the opportunity to voice their opinions in an accessible, inexpensive and pleasurable manner (Shifman 2014). Memes allow young people to reflect on politics, as “the serious world of politics and the trivial one of entertainment feed off each other” in their lives (Street Inthorn and Scott 2013, p.7). Political memes satirizing politics are about making a statement, “participating in a normative debate about how the world should look like” (Shifman 2014, p.120). The creation and dissemination of such satirical memes constitutes both an act of self-expression and political participation. At this point, it is important to note to the definition of political participation has been broadened to encompass activities that were previously dismissed as trivial, such as joking about politicians (Shifman 2014). Collective discussion about politics is now seen as a form of political participation (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013).

Activities like meme creation, dissemination and consumption can serve not only as public commentary and an effective source of satire, but also as important expressions of civic engagement and active citizenship (Burgess, Foth and Klaebe 2006). In order to grasp civic agency, we need to consider both the public and the private sphere; media audiences become publics through deliberating on issues and interacting among themselves in their daily life (Dahlgren 2009). In fact, there are significant political possibilities within popular culture, in the form of cultural texts. Such texts can potentially increase engagement with politics, due to the emotional responses and evaluative judgments that they lead to; through such cultural texts, in this case satirical memes, political reflection might arise (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013).
Citizen engagement to develop, though, there is one precondition; the
existence of a connection among individuals in a community of interest (Street,
Inthorn and Scott 2013). This “public connectedness” is a core requirement for those
“maybe grander seeming civic activities like campaigning for a political issue”
(Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013, p.31). Citizenship is primarily about being connected
to others within a group and within different communities, and part of being a citizen
is being aware of one’s connection with social groupings; within collaborative,
interactive meme communities, this requirement for citizenship is met, since they
contribute to the “construction of group identity and social boundaries” (Shifman
2014, p.100). A healthy democracy requires precisely a “public domain of
associational interaction”, which helps individuals mold their identities and gain skills
necessary for their duties as citizens (Dahlgren 2009, p.69). Through popular culture
resources, like political memes, individuals find a starting point from which they
explore issues of belonging within communities and develop a sense of self as citizens
(Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013; Dahlgren 2009).

Within meme communities, political engagement takes the form of laughter,
which has a proto-political character (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). As Jones (2010)
explained engaging in politics “need not always be the equivalent of swallowing bitter
medicine” (p.15). In this case, play is not necessarily frivolous; instead, it is an area
from which political engagement can develop. Satirical memes are entertaining, yet
that does not automatically undermine their value as public commentary; humour is
inherently critical, and it challenges social norms to at least some degree (Gray, Jones
and Thompson 2009). Memes might seem escapist, yet they can make people
contemplate politics in an open area of critique – besides, since humour plays with
social norms, it essentially has the potential to challenge and criticize them (Gray,
Humour in this case has an empowering role; as Bakhtin argued, playing with the political affords individuals a sense of ownership over it, which gives them greater freedom to engage with it (Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009). Meme users create and spread satire, thus reflecting and evaluating the political realm in an active manner. Their satire allows them to actively question politics, instead of merely consuming it “as information or ‘truth’ from authoritative sources”, like the news (Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009, p.11).

Since popular culture is a constitutive part of people’s daily life, using it to discuss politics makes the latter more inclusive and approachable (Shifman 2014). Civic competencies cannot originate entirely from political society, and to understand democracy, we need to take into consideration aspects falling outside its core institutional structures (Dahlgren 2009). Engagement with politics does not strictly come in the form of campaigning or joining a party; instead, enjoying popular culture and laughing can also be an expression of citizenship. Entertaining politics through memes invites citizen reflection on what politics is and should be, while also rendering citizenship more playful and enjoyable. As Dahlgren (2009) argued,

“the humour, not least the parodies of established forms of political communication that strip away artifice, highlight inconsistencies and generally challenge the authority of official political discourse, offers pleasurable ports of entry to current political topics, as it contributes to the evolution of mediated political culture” (p.139).

Disinterested citizens can find this pleasurable expression of citizenship more welcoming, and thus consider it as a way into politics (Van Zoonen 2005). This could have a democratizing effect, opening up the political realm for a wider group of
people and making citizenship more pleasurable, more accessible and more inclusive. The easily understood and familiar language of popular culture offers people a sense of belonging, and it additionally encourages them to imagine what society should look like (Dahlgren 2009). Political memes, and especially humorous satirical ones that evoke strong emotions, can “provide an entry point into understanding complex ideas and systemic problems” (Rodley 2014). This is crucial for a robust democracy, as “vibrant public discourse depends on more voices having access to channels of engagement” (Milner 2013b, p.2361). Memes can facilitate the expansion of public discussion on politics, and thus contribute to a more engaged, polyvocal citizenship (Milner 2013b, Shifman 2014).

In particular, young people could greatly benefit from entertaining politics; popular culture, with its inclusive mode of representation, has the potential to link them to topics of public interest, like politics (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). Modern politics is characterized by a profound lack of commitment to traditional institutions and a distrust toward governments (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013; Dahlgren 2009), and political authorities are viewed as indifferent; in such cases, “non-hierarchical channels, which abound online, may seem more attractive for participation” (Anduiza, Jensen and Jorba 2012, p.6). Satire is perceived as more authentic by younger individuals, since it maintains a distance from the “manufactured” realities that politicians and advertisers create and promote (Jones 2010). The exact reason why satire is viewed as more authentic is not clear; it could be either due to the anti-authority tone it promotes, or simply its entertaining and “seemingly less agenda-driven” language, which sharply contrasts with the manipulative speech politicians conventionally use (Jones 2010, p.246).
Popular culture and the leaking of humour into politics have been seen as cheapening politics, and memes are occasionally regarded as trivializing politics (Milner 2013b, Tay 2012). Moreover, critics of entertainment-based political discourse claim that there is a positive correlation between satire and cynical views towards politics (Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009; Guggenheim, Kwak and Campbell 2011). Irony and satire are seen in a negative light, since they supposedly belittle politics. However, this is not the case; as explained above, laughter can have an empowering role, and it is a tool for public judgment and sound political criticism. Additionally, satire is “provocative, not dismissive”, and its purpose is not merely to condemn, but to bring about positive change (Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009, p.13).

**Important Considerations**

Satire has the potential to invigorate civic culture and encourage people to engage with politics, while it can also inspire political discussion and attract citizens into politics (Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009). However, it is necessary to bear in mind certain limitations. In particular, it is necessary to highlight that popular culture cannot possibly substitute for politics; it can, however, offer different forms of expression, adding to the already existing forms of political communication (Street 1997; Dahlgren 2009).

Satirical memes can potentially lead to more active discussions on politics, yet that does not mean that all kinds of talk qualify as political deliberation. Political talk has a purpose, and it aims to find solutions to problems; as a result, we have to be critical and highly selective in the quest to determine where discussion “morphs into civic talk”, instead of considering all popular culture as political communication (Dahlgren 2009, p.90). Although there are resources for citizen engagement in
popular culture, this does not mean that people always use them; in reality, there are times when people seek entertainment only, intentionally suspending critical thinking in order to have a lighthearted interaction with popular culture (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013). Consequently, satirical memes do not always serve the functions outlined above, and are sometimes indeed used when people simply seek entertainment.

Despite those limitations, satirical memes and popular culture at large should be acknowledged as important sources for citizenship; they allow the creation of effective, bottom-up political satire, enable more people to perform as citizens, and "make citizenship more pleasurable, more engaging, and more inclusive" (Van Zoonen 2005, p.151). Popular culture plays an important role in politics, allowing people to explore and express the emotions that drive politics (Street 1997). Memes, thus, are a "populist way to engage with public discourse" (Milner 2013b, p.2360), and are much more than shallow discourse; within the plethora of jokes, meme users discuss their views and express their own opinions, critically evaluating modern politics.
Conclusion

There is an inextricable link between the political field and popular culture, and juxtaposing actively engaged citizens and passive audiences of fans is no longer tenable. The affective investment, creativity, critical evaluation and community-building that result from an involvement with popular culture are also valuable in terms of citizenship; the value of mainstream culture for politics lies not on rationality, but on the affect that it invokes, which is crucial to developing and maintaining strong political engagement. Engagement, as previously discussed, includes everyday tasks, like posting memes and commenting on satirical texts online.

Although commonly dismissed as mundane and pointless, satirical memes are a pure form of bottom-up expression and an effective source of political criticism. Political memes satirizing politics are a form of public commentary; as a medium for self-expression, memes are employed to satirize politics while also providing entertainment. Such memes seem to carry other implications for politics as well; due to their nature, they are easy to create, consume and spread. As a result, they provide entry points to the complex realm of politics, making it more inclusive, more accessible, and more democratic.

My analysis largely focused on the complex relationship between popular culture and politics, with an emphasis on satire created by internet users in the form of memes. Through the research undertaken, satirical political memes emerged as serving a variety of purposes. They are an effective source of political criticism, allowing users to employ their creativity and critical thinking to actively engage with politics; the discursive analysis of a select sample of such memes in chapter 2 provided a brief account of the ways in which satire is constructed. The memes
discussed were selected based on their popularity and longevity, due to time and space limitations, a very small meme sample was used in this study. Future research could delve into different meme types within the still image category, such as reaction Photoshops, or focus on the analysis of specific meme series, like advice animals.

Since the meme territory remains largely unexplored, it offers fertile ground for more in-depth research. In this project, I attempted to uncover who creates and shares memes, as well as the motivation behind those behaviours. My findings were in line with existing research in user-generated content, so I would argue that their validity is relatively high. However, there is no comprehensive pre-existing research on the identity of political meme users in particular, or meme users generally, and asserting with certainty that my findings are robust and generalizable would be problematic without comparison. As a result, more in-depth research is required in the area of political memes, both with respect to political meme users and their motivation for creating, disseminating and consuming satirical memes.

My analysis was based on two focus group sessions with a group of eleven people, who all shared a common background as privileged segments of the population; they were all young, Caucasian, middle-class, and had varying levels of a college education. This homogeneity can be problematic in this case, as it limits the generalizability of the findings. As a result, the communities that generate and diffuse political memes remain an area to be further explored.

In this dissertation, I argued that political memes can make politics more inclusive and accessible, especially for younger people who tend to be active and enthusiastic consumers of popular culture. However, an important question arises; can all young people tap into the democratizing potential of memes, or are certain groups
excluded? Memes exist in the internet, and for people to reap their benefits in terms of politics, they require access to internet. Consequently, meme creation, diffusion and consumption could be explored with regards to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, education, age, and other factors, ideally with a greater number of focus groups.
Bibliography


APPENDIX 1.

GLOSSARY

Image Macro: a popular meme type, consisting of a still image with text overlaid on it.

KnowYourMeme: Also known as KYM, it is an encyclopedia of viral phenomena and memes. It documents the history and evolution of memes.

Meme Creator: A website that hosts memes and also allows users to create their own based on available templates.

Meme Generator: A website that hosts memes and also allows users to create their own based on available templates.

Quickmeme: A website that hosts memes and also allows users to create their own based on available templates.

Reddit: A news and social networking site, where registered users can submit content and vote others’ submissions “up” or “down”, forwarding the popular ones to the top of the topic page. Topics are organized in categories known as “subreddits”.

Scumbag Steve: a popular image macro series featuring a young man with a sideways baseball cap in a hallway. It is used to denote unethical or inappropriate behaviour.

Tumblr: A microblogging platform and social networking site, where registered users post content in the form of images, sounds, videos, and links to their blogs. Content is published on the Dashboard, which is the live feed of posts from blogs users follow.

YouTube: A popular video-sharing website.
APPENDIX 2.

Figure 2.1

WHAT DO YOU MEAN

I CANT EAT AMERICA

Figure 2.2

WHAT DO YOU MEAN

I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO EAT PEOPLE
Figure 2.3

WHAT DO YOU MEAN
MY HITLER MUSTACHE IS TOO SKINNY?

Figure 2.4

I SAID NORTH KOREA IS A GREAT PLACE FOR HUNAN RICE
NOT HUMAN RIGHTS
Figure 2.5

I'M GOING TO NUKE EVERYONE

Kim, eat a Snickers.

Why

Because you turn into a war mongler when you're hungry

Better?

Better.
I DON'T ALWAYS THREATEN THE WHOLE WORLD

BUT WHEN I DO EVERYONE IS LAUGHING AT ME
Figure 2.7

NEPOTISM
EASIER THAN WORKING YOUR WAY TO THE TOP

Figure 2.8

YOU KNOW YOU ARE A GOOD LEADER
WHEN YOU GET 100% OF ALL VOTES IN YOUR TOTALLY DEMOCRATIC ELECTION
Figure 2.9

NORTH KOREA

Complete with death camps and government propaganda
Figure 2.16
Figure 2.17

Figure 2.18

How do you address inequality of women?

I have binders full of women. I placed two women on the Supreme Court.
Figure 2.19

That's great.
You didn't build that.

Figure 2.20

Genesis 1:1
The Beginning
In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

You didn't build that.
Somebody else made that happen.
Figure 2.21

I DON'T ALWAYS BUILD IT MYSELF

BUT WHEN I DO, OBAMA SAYS OTHERS MADE IT HAPPEN

Figure 2.22

YOU DIDN'T BUILD THAT
APPENDIX 3.

Online Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What prompted you to join this focus group?
2. Do you enjoy political memes? Why/Why not?
3. Do you ever discuss memes with others, online or offline?
4. Do you remember the first time you saw a political meme?
5. What was your original view of political memes? Has it changed?
6. Are political memes good or bad for democracy? Why?
7. Do you create or share political memes? How often?
8. Do you view political memes? How often?
9. Are memes entertaining? How so?
10. Are memes informative? How so?
11. Why do you share political memes?
12. When would you share a political meme?
13. Who do you share those political memes with?
14. Why do you create political memes?
15. When is it that you feel the need to create a political meme?
16. How well-informed would you say you are about current political affairs?
17. Do political memes ever lead you to seek information about political affairs/news you were not aware of?
18. What is it that you most enjoy about political memes?
Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to take part in a research study of a Masters’ student project. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take the time to review the following information and ensure you fully understand what the research involves prior to participating in it. Please ask questions about anything you find unclear.

Study Title

Satirical Political Memes: an Effective Source of Political Criticism?

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to examine who creates satirical memes about politics online, and explore the motivation behind the creation and distribution of those memes.

Why have I been selected?

Participants have been selected based on their affinity for political memes and your willingness to participate in the research.

What will I be required to do if I do decide to participate?

You will be asked to participate in an online video discussion with other participants, responding to questions about political memes and your use of them, your relationship to the internet and meme culture in general.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The discussion will take place in a non-judgmental, open and friendly environment – however, you might experience some discomfort discussing a topic related to politics, if that is a sensitive topic for you to discuss.

What happens to the data collected?

The data from the focus group discussions will be transcribed and analysed thematically. Excerpts may be included verbatim in the final project, and all transcripts will remain in Vasiliki Plevriti’s possession for a year after the day the discussion took place. If necessary, the transcripts may be examined by University of Warwick staff members.
How is confidentiality maintained?

All information collected about you during the course of this research will be kept strictly confidential; you will not be identified by name in the transcripts, and a pseudonym can be used, if requested.

What happens if I change my mind and decide not to participate after all?

You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without providing a reason.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?

No, but you will be given the opportunity to win a gift voucher to Amazon.com.

What is the duration of the research?

There will be two focus group sessions through Gmail, each lasting for one hour.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

It is possible that the findings will be published in an academic journal, and the whole dissertation will be available in the University of Warwick dissertation archives.

Further Information and Contact Details

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+302106016470
+306972545426
APPENDIX 5.

Research Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Satirical Political Memes: an Effective Source of Political Criticism?

Researcher Information: Vasiliki Plevriti, MA Candidate, Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, University of Warwick. v.plevriti@warwick.ac.uk

Please tick the appropriate box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information sheet, and I have had the chance to ask questions

2. I understand that my participation is unpaid and voluntary

3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any point, without providing an explanation

4. I understand that my responses will be strictly confidential

5. I agree to participate in the research

YES NO

6. I agree to using a video camera during the focus groups

7. I agree to the focus group being audio recorded

8. I agree that data gathered in this research may be stored and University of Warwick staff may have access to my responses, which will be anonymised

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