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## The Potential Electoral Influence of Internet Memes

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# The Potential Electoral Influence of Internet Memes

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*Written for Dr. Stephen Voss*

Senior Honors Thesis

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Alexander Nix described the methodology of Cambridge Analytica, a data firm specializing in microtargeting voters, by emphasizing the importance of the individual. Nix proclaimed, “If you know the personality of the people you’re targeting, you can nuance your messaging to resonate more effectively with those key groups” (Illing 2018). In other words, if one knows how key voters already feel on hot issues, it’s much easier to tailor a campaign to persuade those groups. The desires for influential insight on voter personalities keeps data firms like Cambridge Analytica in high demand during election season.

Donald Trump’s digital presence was far greater than Hillary Clinton’s during the 2016 election cycle. Pro-Trump “chatbots” – artificially intelligent software with elementary communication skills – flooded social media websites with Pro-Trump messages. Some went so far as to send messages to Twitter users with the intent to rant or interfere in a discussion (Markoff 2016). The appearance of chatbots and other possible propaganda machines caused a

great stir over the use of citizens' online data and the role online activity plays in a political context. Given the online presence of political candidates in recent years, it's time to consider social media and its components as political rhetoric.

We know that social media has some sort of political influence. The fact is exemplified by multiple studies noting its positive association with political organization (Vromen, Xenos, and Loader 2015, Lenhardt 2016), political expression (Al Zidjaly 2017, Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch, Keating and Melis 2017, Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero 2016), and its ability to grant easier access to political knowledge (Karlsen and Enjolras 2016, McAllister 2016). However, far fewer studies ponder the influence of one of the many facets most commonly found on social media in recent years – internet memes.

Few studies analyze memes as units of political rhetoric. Limor Shifman, one of the most oft-cited researchers when it comes to internet memes, lists three functions political memes possess that support an argument for their potential influence. The first is that their extensive use in recent campaigns – such as in Barack Obama's integration of memes into his 2012 campaign (Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero 2016) – demonstrates their persuasive capability. Second, memes as individual creations link the personal to the political, the individual to the collective, which demonstrates their potential to encourage organized coordination by citizens. Finally, since memes are user-generated and cheap to make and distribute, they have the opportunity to grow as a form of political expression and public discourse (Shifman 2014a).

Each function suggests that memes have massive potential to influence young voters, especially since that age demographic is more likely to engage with them on their social media and be more susceptible to their messages as a modern form of political communication. In recognizing internet memes as a modern communicative media for political activity, and in

acknowledging their potential as tools of visual rhetoric and political participation, this paper seeks to use a visually rhetorical approach to understand which characteristics of an individual meme make it most effective. The research question ponders the effectiveness of a meme as measured as its ability to influence a young voter to share the meme, like the candidate it references, and evaluate their knowledge of the candidate referenced as reliable. The study searches for the exact elements within a meme and meme culture that grant it the influence necessary to persuade a voter.

However, the characteristics of the voter cannot be ignored. This study also seeks to find which demographics are most likely to be influenced, using Cambridge Analytica's belief that voter personalities matter. In all, I hope to discern what type of meme, and what type of voter, is most susceptible to an internet meme and why. Therefore, I can effectively "target" the voter and offer empirical results to anyone with an interest in memetics, the young electorate, or political communication.

## Literature review

### Theoretical Background

The term "meme" originates in the work of famed biologist Richard Dawkins (1989). It is a shortened version of the word "*mimeme*, a cognate related to the Greek 'mimesis' with its etymology overlapping the English word 'mime' and 'mimicry' or the French '*meme*', ('the same')" (Cannizzaro 2016). In the Dawkinsian sense, a meme is the label given to individual units of cultural transmission as they are mimicked by others. At first, a meme was likened to a gene which passes through the transference of genetic traits, but Dawkins, insisting that the same

evolutionary laws that are present in biology are also present in culture, coined the term to define any of a number of replicators which are passed through social imitation. The word itself describes the flow and evolution of ideas and practices (Dawkins 1989).

Dawkins' views on culture in the genetic sense were so influential that the science of "memetics" was born. But when memetics is applied to the concept of internet memes, confusion about its role as a source of communication arises for several reasons. First, "the phrase 'Internet meme' is commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet" (Shifman 2013). In other words, internet memes are vastly diverse in both content, structure, and where they originate and roost. Such a broad definition of "meme" makes it difficult to discern their influence as communicative media, much less political participation, since they have many forms that could hold varying degrees, and types, of influence. To avoid confusion, this paper uses the terms "meme" and "internet meme" interchangeably.

Second, memetics has virtually ignored the field of communication in favor of fields such as biology and psychology. Such a mistake leaves out any useful theories to accompany the role of Internet memes, social media, and the Web 2.0 (Shifman 2013). It is also much more difficult to consider memes as political communication when they are largely lacking attempts to explain their existence as communicative media at all.

Finally, the study of memes itself is not safe from its own evolution as scholars attempt to fill in the holes they have left in the areas of communication. Some studies opt for a more semiotic view of internet memes which allows them to classify the memes as a unified system of signs subject to translation (Cannizzaro 2016, Marcus and Singer 2017). Other studies opt for a more individualized approach, foregoing the thought of memes as a single unified entity and

instead treats each of their characteristics as an empirically analyzable trait. But these analyses still take place within a system of common characteristics and mutual cultural experience (Shifman 2013, Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch). For the purposes of this paper, I will use the latter mode of analysis to answer which traits of an internet meme and a voter interact to influence that voter to (1) share a meme, (2) like the candidate specified in the meme, if applicable, and (3) believe the information conveyed in the meme as reliable.

### Educational Usage

While it's easy to think of a meme as a humorous image or a mindless smartphone video creation, they have proven themselves to be useful tools for both educational and cultural purposes. In the classroom, memes combine pop culture references with lesson plans to engage and inspire students, leading one teacher to praise them as “prime real estate at the intersection of pedagogy and popular culture,” and as “a beautiful tool to explain a concept...” (Scardina 2017). But educators aren't the only group using memes to connect with their audience. In 2015, Delta Air Lines was featured in *Professional Safety*, the American Society of Safety Professionals' monthly publication, for its pre-flight safety videos featuring popular internet meme characters such as Keyboard Cat and the Annoying Orange. Delta's Mauricio Parise applauded the ability of the memes and cameos as a way to “tap into the zeitgeist as the latest way of capturing our customers,” in an attempt to get even the most seasoned travelers to pay attention to the important safety procedures they've seen a dozen times before (Delta 2015).

Both instances – the use of memes in a classroom and in airplane safety videos – have two facets in common which help explain their potential as political influencers. First, both examples serve as an illustration of how memes can be used to engage an audience. By acting as

a hook, memes can help keep or draw the attention of voters to key pieces of information. Second, both examples also illustrate the importance of pop culture in an educational context. Since memes make references to pop culture, a meme with a political motivation would, in theory, have a better chance of teaching the electorate some quick piece of information than a more mundane advertisement.

Both instances therefore lead to the logical assumption that memes have the potential to hold the attention of young voters. But both instances also share a flaw – they give the impression that the only characteristic that makes a meme effective is its inclusion of trendy references. If this were the case, it would be easy to measure a meme’s effectiveness by evaluating how people respond to a meme with popular material and a meme without. But such a narrow-minded view of memes as simply carriers of pop culture ignores their need for contextual understanding.

When in an educational context, it makes sense for a meme to focus on making learning fun, and so they serve this purpose with random appearances of familiar icons and jokes to keep our attention. But not all memes are so superficial. Take for example the American Chopper Argument meme. This meme, featured in Figure 1, originated from a scene in an American reality television show called *American Chopper* in which Paul Teutul Sr. and Paul Teutul Jr. have a heated discussion about Teutul Jr.’s tardiness at work (Adam 2018). The meme itself is unique in the sense that it presents information in a Socratic fashion. It’s dialogue format allows for both the presentation of opposing viewpoints and the development of a clear thesis. The joke stems from the fact that the original argument which bore the meme was filled with profanity and fake reality TV drama, whereas the new creations present complex ideas such as classism and wealth inequality in a surprisingly clear and humorous manner (Yglesias 2018).

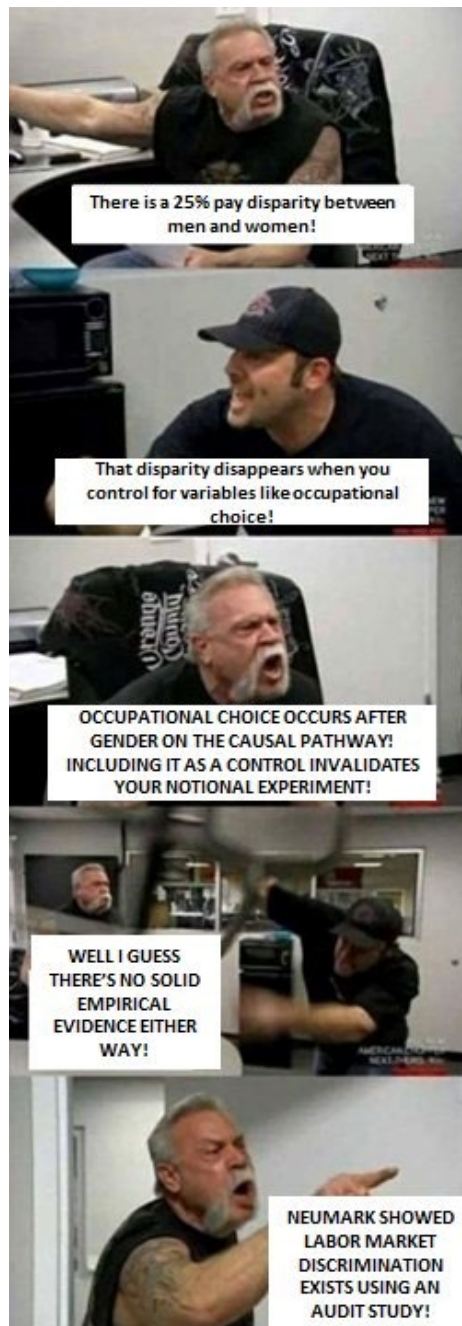


Figure 1: An example of the American Chopper Argument meme in which Teutul Sr. and Teutul Jr. are depicted as arguing about the wage gap between men and women (Yglesias 2018).



The American Chopper Argument meme exemplifies how a meme can mutate to be most effective in any given area. For teachers and airlines, a lighthearted video featuring pop culture icons provides the hook they need to keep a customer's attention. For other entities, memes can still provide a hook and offer deeper insight on an issue in a method that is still fun and understandable. In the following sections, I describe how memes can be used further in both culture and politics to demonstrate not only their versatility as modes of communication, but also their potential to combine education, culture, and politics to influence young voters.

### Cultural Usage and Norms

When Ryan Milner, another pioneer in the intellectual discourse surrounding internet memes, asked his own class to define them, one student responded that it's similar to "a nationwide inside joke" (Milner 2013). While the student's definition may seem comical at first, it's actually the most fundamental way to describe an internet meme in the cultural sense – they're inside jokes. Because memes are so diverse, a great deal of contextual understanding is required in order to "get" them, similar to how an inside joke requires prior information to be funny. The context comes from knowledge of what is and isn't popular locally, nationally, and even internationally – most of which can be found on the Web 2.0 or in its history.

To demonstrate the need for contextual awareness, take for example the internet meme sensation known as "Ebola-chan." The initial drawing of Ebola-chan, titled Ebola-tan, first appeared on a Japanese social networking site called Pixiv as a darkly humorous artistic representation of the 2014-2015 Ebola epidemic. She soon spread to other internet boards such as 4chan and Reddit, both American-based. The popularity of the manga-style drawing of a girl with pink Ebola virus-shaped pigtails inspired fan art, disgust, and subsequently earned her a

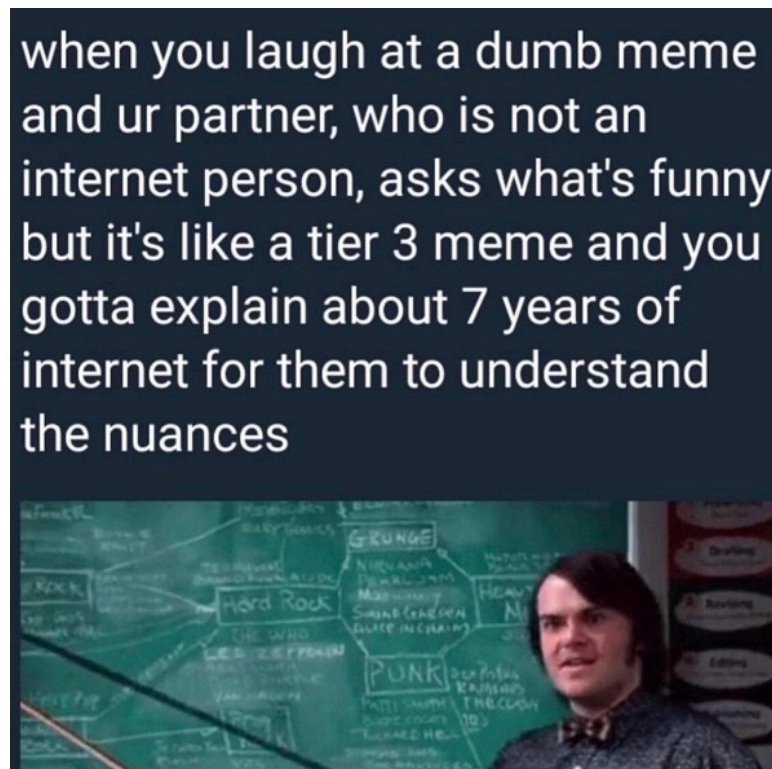
spot in *Know Your Meme* – the online encyclopedia for popular internet memes. She is rendered as “a social response to a lethal epidemic in the digital age,” and her “significance is firmly rooted in the fears and uncertainty surrounding the then-rapidly spreading virus” (Marcus and Singer 2017). Ebola-chan exemplifies a need for international awareness and also illustrates how memes can become “dated” – Ebola is no longer a threat to the international community, and so Ebola-chan is hidden away in the depths of the Web 2.0 and in the memories of seasoned meme veterans.



*Figure 2: The original Ebola-chan, a prime example of the cultural awareness, and sometimes dark humor, needed to understand some internet memes (Don 2018).*

Cultural awareness is important to a meme’s effectiveness, especially when gaps in a person’s understanding are perceived as indicators of ignorance or as a burden to others. Not only does a person need to have context to understand the inside joke; they also need that context to avoid ridicule. Tensions can arise between someone who “gets” a meme and someone who

does not. For example, the meme in Figure 3 features a still shot of Jack Black from the movie *School of Rock* and mocks the frustration one may feel when prompted to explain the humor behind a meme. The picture of an annoyed Black with a chalkboard full of diagrams behind him combines with the caption, “gotta [sic] explain about 7 years of internet...” to communicate the complexity of memes, the effort it takes to explain them to someone outside of the loop, and the irritation one may feel when asked to do so.



*Figure 3: A meme featuring a scene from School of Rock. The caption and image combine to illustrate the complexity of memes and the energy it takes to explain them (nickcolp 2018).*

The “inside joke” analogy of memes is significant in the sense that it explains why certain groups of people may be more susceptible to memes – such as young people who spend more time on social media – but it also serves as a warning to those who seek to master memetics as a form of communication. The inside joke can be very, very strict. Not only is there a tension between

those who understand meme culture and those who don't, but there's also tension within meme subculture.

For example, a prime case of the stress within meme subculture can be found on the website known as 4chan, which is sometimes referred to as the birthplace of memes due to its anonymous-based discussions and "for the lulz" (meaning "for the laughs," as a joke, no matter how vile or offensive the content) attitude which contribute to its unique online culture (Marcus and Singer 2017). As Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman (2017) discovered in their analysis of 4chan, "the deep connection between memes and the culture of some online communities means that they function as cues of membership, distinguishing in-group members from mere passersby." The cherished idea of being a member of a specific meme culture is especially evident in 4chan's use of the term "newfag," a derogatory word specific to the site and commonly used to identify a new, inexperienced user who is unfamiliar with 4chan's customs, codes, and culture.

Furthermore, in the context of subculture, some scholars have found memes to be hindered by their own audiences, either by societal gatekeepers or hierarchical ideologies (Milner 2012, Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Gatekeeping in this instance refers to a participant's tendency to "mold their memetic contributions according to a surprisingly small number of formulations" (Shifman 2014b). In other words, a meme is likely to be shunned by the community if it does not correctly balance previously accepted formats and new, creative content (Milner 2012). Hierarchy in this context resembles what I jokingly referred to as "seasoned meme veterans" when discussing Ebola-chan. Some users act as the gatekeepers since they have been a member of a specific community for longer, therefore being better accustomed to its norms and practices. Their power stems from an established ability to ridicule a person, shame their meme creations, or in some cases, block an online user from returning to the forum.

We can observe the barriers of gatekeeping and hierarchy in 4chan as well. For example, the users of 4chan strongly condemn “forced memes” – memes that are “forced” onto a message board instead of emerging organically from the conversation (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) – as an act of gatekeeping. Memes which are not seen as good enough for the community are actively ridiculed and dissuaded from becoming viral, thus the gates are closed to keep the meme from becoming anything more than an anonymous post. The use of the term “newfag” to describe an outsider is a common indication of hierarchy. Only those who are aware of a mistake – for example, trying to rename Long Cat, an established internet meme character, as “Ceiling Cat” – have the power to ridicule a mistake, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows an example of gatekeeping and hierarchy within 4chan as a gatekeeper degrades another user as a newfag for (1) not including the names of the original LOLCat characters, Longcat and Tacgnol in their meme creation, and (2) disgracing Saturday, commonly called *caturday*, by posting a “bad” meme. The interaction between the two users is an example of the tension found within meme subculture due to gatekeeping and hierarchy.



Figure 4: Example of gatekeeping and hierarchy within 4chan (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017).

Such barriers prompt an inquiry of not only which characteristics of a meme are permissible, but also of who has the most memetic prowess to understand, control, and be influenced by them. In order to study both facets, this study views memes as a new form of communicative media. It calls for a visually rhetorical analysis of individual attributes, therefore measuring what is and is not permissible, and includes an evaluation of the demographics that may be most susceptible to their rhetoric.

### Political Communication and Usage

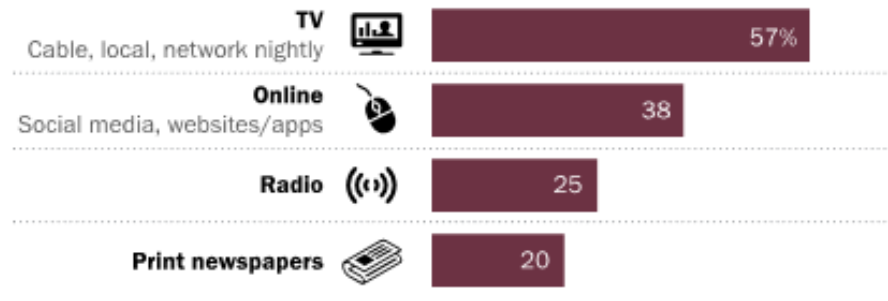
As one journalism professor put it, “when technology changes, journalism has always been forced to change, too” (Rosen 2007). We can observe the truth of journalism’s evolution in the average American adult’s news consumption. Table 1 includes data from a study by the Pew Research Center in 2016 which found that only five percent of 18- to 29-year-olds receive their news from a print newspaper while almost half of their elders still do (Mitchell et al. 2016a). The same study also found that young people have more negative attitudes about the news media in general, and prefer to find their news online. Almost a third of young Americans get news from social media, a rate much higher than any other age group, or from news websites and apps (Mitchell et al. 2016b).

But even though our communication technology is changing, the existing literature on political communication largely ignores the youth’s rejection of older forms of media (Barnhurst 2011) or the potential of internet memes. Although not all young people think the Web 2.0 is a reliable source for political information or government interaction (Bridges, Appel, and Grossklags 2012), its applications – such as memes – have profound implications for political

Table 1: Data from the Pew Research Center regarding Americans' news consumption (Mitchell et al. 2016a)

**About four-in-ten Americans often get news online**

*% of U.S. adults who often get news on each platform*



*% of each age group who often get news on each platform*

	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
<b>TV</b>	27%	45%	72%	85%
<b>Online</b>	50	49	29	20
<b>Radio</b>	14	27	29	24
<b>Print newspapers</b>	5	10	23	48

Note: Just 1% said they never got news on any platform (not shown).  
 Source: Survey conducted Jan. 12-Feb. 8, 2016.  
 "The Modern News Consumer"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

organizing, expression, and mobilization. Several studies (and some journalists) praise memes' contributions to political discourse as an outlet for government criticism or simply political expression (Al Zidjaly 2017, Hoffman 2017, Huntington 2016, Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero 2016, Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch). As one study put it, "In the online world, the distribution, mutation, and saliency of a meme also depend, in part, on the characteristics of the individual who spreads the content... Thus, Internet memes can act as a common frame, or reference point, for political discussion and action" (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch).

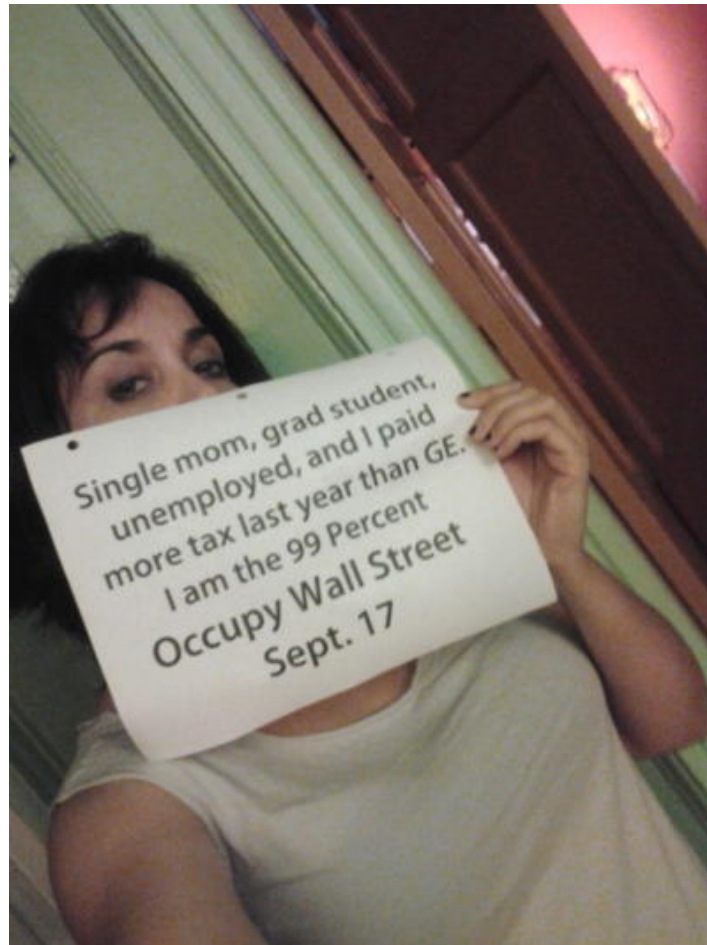
In other words, when someone likes, shares, or creates a meme that resonates with their political beliefs, it may be interpreted as an invitation to converse, as a dog-whistle to other like-minded individuals, or simply as a label of those beliefs.

Memes have been used in activist activities as an element of mobilization. Although the literature is mixed on whether memes – or their carrier, social media – contributes to increased political participation (Keating and Melis 2017, McAllister 2016, Vromen, Xenos, and Loader 2015, Milner 2016, Shifman 2014a), we do know that their integration into the political sphere has changed the definition of “participation” to include smaller, unprecedented tasks such as simply commenting on political posts (Milner 2016, Shifman 2014a, Huntington 2016). Heidi Huntington (2016) described the change in participation as “an optional lane...into the crossroads of networked individualism and global data-flow...” The optional lane – where participation is as simple as clicking a button or typing a sentence – is made possible through an Internet meme’s ability to traverse across people and space. For example, when a person shares a meme to their personal social media page, it creates a network where it has the ability to persuade others, invite discourse, or signal a connection with like-minded people on an issue.

Take for example the We Are The 99% meme. It originated on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 on the social media site Tumblr in support of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, a protest looking to criticize the social and economic justices within the United States. The slogan “we are the 99 percent” relates to the argument that the top one percent of the American population unfairly controls almost all of the country’s financial wealth. (Shifman 2014a). The blog featuring the original post asked readers to submit a photo of themselves holding a sign which briefly summarized how the country’s financial situation affects them. By the end of 2011, the



blog had been featured on Business Insider, the Huffington Post, and the Economist with hundreds of photo submissions (Brad 2012).



*Figure 5: An example of the We Are The 99 Percent meme (Brad 2012).*

The connection between OWS and high memetic activity is due to a meme's potential as communication media, political expression, and visual rhetoric. The 99 percent meme originated on one social medium and quickly spread to other social media, and news outlets, because it allowed people to engage in both political expression and participation. The act of submitting a photo became a form of participation since it showed support for the movement. But the meme was also an act of political lament. The pictures of everyday Americans featuring their stories –

people unable to afford healthcare, unable to repay crippling student debt, etc. – acted not only as a sign of discontent with the current political sphere, but also as visual rhetoric to others that described exactly what OWS wanted to address with its protests.

### Content, Form, and Stance

As scholars continue to ignore the influence of new media and remain deadlocked on the influence of memes on political mobilization, there is an unfair gap regarding how memes influence young voters both as a whole and with individual characteristics. First, a meme's ability to be used as an educational tool would be useful for anyone looking to communicate complex ideas quickly and effectively. This is not only because memes can hook their audience with eye-catching pop culture references, but also because they offer small doses of information – maybe from both sides of the argument – that can be easily spread and decrease the need for strenuous cognitive processing. Second, a meme's tendency to be governed by cultural happenings means that they could also be governed by political happenings as those events become part of a region's culture. Third, internet memes have an advantage as products of the Web 2.0 in a time where social media and the Internet continue to dominate the media landscape (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch). Given their ability to educate and intertwine with popular events, memes can be rhetorically deconstructed to be studied as a form of visual rhetoric within political communications systems.

The extent of a meme's political influence is best understood when analyzed from a visually rhetorical perspective using Limor Shifman's (2013) three memetic dimensions – content, form, and stance. Shifman best explains the three dimensions in their 2013 article for the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*:

“The first dimension relates mainly to the **content** of a specific text, referencing to both the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by it. The second dimension relates to **form**: This is the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses. It includes both visual/audible dimensions specific to certain texts, as well as more complex genre-related patterns organizing them (such as lip-synch or animation). While ideas and their expression have been widely discussed in relation to the meme concept, the third—communication-related dimension—is presented here for the first time. This dimension—which relates to the information memes convey about their own communication—is labeled here as **stance**...I use “stance” to depict the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers” (Shifman 2013).

Several studies use Shifman’s dimensions to individually analyze the characteristics of a meme and describe the influence they can potentially have as instruments of rhetoric (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016, Huntington 2016, Lenhardt 2016, Shifman 2013). However, few of these studies exclusively look at political memes which call for a more specified application of the three dimensions. When relating to a meme with political implications, content is synonymous with the ideological leanings of the meme. Keeping the We Are The 99 Percent meme as an example, its content would be liberal since the OWS movement had leftist ideology. A political meme’s form holds the specifics of its visual qualities – the image, the font, the punchline, and the medium in which it was received. The form can also be correct or incorrect, as we have seen in the context of gatekeeping communities. An incorrect form, for example, misuses a popular character (such as in the case of Long Cat) or botches an established joke syntax. The We Are The 99 Percent meme’s form is centered around the individual, it has no

font of its own since all of the words associated with it are handwritten on signs, and the media is mostly on the Internet. The form of the meme featured in Figure 5 is correct because it follows the visual qualities and the narrative dictated by the memes before it.

But stance is more complicated. Shifman (2013) further breaks down stance, identifying the subdimensions of participation structures, keying, and communicative functions. Using concepts found in discourse and media studies, Shifman describes participation structures as the rules regulating who is entitled to participate and how. In the context of a politically oriented meme, the participation structure would be any cue that encourages an able voter to participate in the election or the campaign. Shifman describes keying as the tone and style of communication. For a political internet meme, keying would be identified by the use of humor, cynicism, or any other emotion a meme would use to persuade a voter. For example, if a meme used a cynical tone about an opponent, acting as part of a smear campaign, it would have negative keying. Finally, using the work of Roman Jakobson, Shifman describes six communicative functions: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. Referential focuses on context; emotive appeals to the receiver's emotions; conative refers to the receiver and their paths to action; phatic serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication; metalingual seeks to find mutual agreement; and finally, poetic focuses on the aesthetic of a message.

For a political meme, the communicative function could be any combination of the six. For example, the We Are The 99 Percent meme is emotive, phatic, and poetic. It is emotive because it appeals to feelings of anger at the economic situation of the United States and feelings of sympathy for those negatively affected by it. It is phatic because it is meant to garner support for the OWS movement and encourage others to become involved. Finally, it is also poetic

because the visuals – the gloomy tone, the eerie silence of the person holding the sign – give the meme a depressing aesthetic.

## Methodology

### Meme Creation

Much of the literature surrounding Internet memes observes them in their natural state online. From a purely observational perspective, we can trace the evolution of memes that already exist, and in retrospect, we can make assumptions about the influence they had on a person or persons. This study sought to take the existing literature and apply it to an experiment where we could control for the different aspects of a meme, the different messages they sent, and then observe how people reacted.

Using content, form, and stance, I utilized an online meme generator provided by Imgflip LLC (2018a) to create memes about a fictional political candidate named Jonathan Bell (I chose to use the Imgflip meme generator because it was free and housed popular meme templates). By using a fake candidate, I was able to control for any prior information a voter may have received about the campaign. I also had control over that candidate's perceived ideology. Some of the memes I created depicted Bell as a liberal, some as a conservative, and some as neither. I used different ideological cues in the memes to see how different voters responded to them.

I chose to test a meme's effectiveness in three areas: Sharing, Feeling, and Reliability. "Sharing" measures how likely a person would be to share the meme with friends. An effective political meme would have some element that encourages its spread through a person's social circle, therefore acting as a communication medium to transmit its message across a wide array

of voters. “Feeling” measures how much a person likes or dislikes a candidate based on the information received in a meme. In this sense, an effective political meme would act as a tool of visual rhetoric to persuade a voter’s perception of a candidate to be either favorable or unfavorable, depending on the meme’s intent. Finally, “Reliability” measures how dependable a person evaluates the information conveyed in the meme. An effective political meme would be believable since its purpose is to inform and persuade.

I created three pairs of memes and one control meme to test Sharing, Feeling, and Reliability. Summaries and visuals of the memes used in the experiment can be found in Tables 6 and 7 at the end of this section. The control meme was meant to remain neutral in all aspects as a baseline to test a person’s willingness to share a politically motivated meme at all. It did not indicate ideology or include a campaign message. It contained a Shutterstock image of a well-dressed, older white male. The font used a “My Face When” setup, a common joke used to illustrate “how users would respond to a given situation, whether it be hypothetical or based on experiences of real life” (Hamilton 2011).

The control meme also did not use a popular template like the other memes in the experiment, however it still followed the format of a typical image macro with text superimposed over an image (Huntington 2016, Milner 2016). By foregoing a popular form, it’s possible the control meme could have triggered a difference in the responses of young voters since it used a generic image macro setup that did not emerge organically from the Web like the other memes.

*Table 2: Hypothesis 1, Sharing, Feeling, and Reliability*

Hypothesis #1	Sharing	Feeling	Reliability
The popularity of a meme's form...	Influences a young voter to share the meme.	Influences a young voter to like the candidate it references.	Influences a young voter to evaluate the information within the meme as reliable.

The meme pairs were meant to be tested against each other as each pair used the same template but had a subtle difference between meme A and meme B. The differences were intended to provoke a measurable change in the results of the voters who received the counterpart of each pair. The first pair tested form. Using “The Most Interesting Man in the World” meme, I sought to determine what would happen if one meme used the correct form (i.e., the correct version of the punchline for that meme) while its counterpart did not.

The Most Interesting Man in the World is a product of the highly successful Dos Equis beer campaign in which the incredibly adventurous and refined gentleman promoting the beer often ended with the phrasal template, "I don't always **X**, but when I do, I **Y**." The memes based on him follow the same form, often using humor to make Y the punchline of X (Vlad\_Ulrick 2010). I chose this template to test correct and incorrect form because I felt that the success and timeliness of the Dos Equis campaign gave this meme the greatest probability of being recognized, therefore having the greatest chance of provoking a negative response if the punchline took the wrong form. I believed form in this context mattered to young voters because of the gatekeeping effect. If a meme has a greater chance of being spread or believed because it follows the correct syntax of its associated joke, that would be a significant finding for anyone interested in using memes to influence young voters.

*Table 3: Hypothesis 2, Sharing, Feeling, and Reliability*

Hypothesis #2	Sharing	Feeling	Reliability
The incorrect usage of a meme's form...	Deters a young voter from sharing the meme.	Deters a young voter from liking the candidate it references.	Deters a young voter from evaluating the information within the meme as reliable.

The second meme pair tested campaign association. It used the “Daily Struggle” template. The Daily Struggle meme consists of two panels. The top panel shows two red buttons with contradicting statements; the bottom panel shows a character struggling to decide which button to press. The inherent humor typically stems from the fact that the choice between the buttons should be easy. For example, in the first appearance of the meme, the two buttons read “be a dick” and “don’t be a dick” (MedleyManiac 2016).

My translation of the meme followed the correct form for both memes in the pair, with the two buttons being housed in a voting booth. The two button choices were “Jonathan Bell” and “Some Noob,” with “noob” being an informal term commonly found on the Internet to describe someone inexperienced in a particular field (2018b). The difference was that Meme B of this pair included a small campaign message: “Don’t be this guy. Visit [VoteBell.com](#) for more information.” The message indicates to meme recipients that to avoid getting stressed over a seemingly obvious choice, they should visit what is presumably Bell’s campaign website (the website is fake).

The meme was intended to encourage a voter not only to vote, but also to learn more information about Bell and don’t vote “some noob” into office. I chose this meme because the two-button image fit perfectly with a voting-booth atmosphere.

*Table 4: Hypothesis 3, Sharing, Feeling, and Reliability*

Hypothesis #3	Sharing	Feeling	Reliability
A meme with direct campaign attributes, as identified by a campaign message...	Influences a young voter to share the meme.	Influences a young voter to like the candidate it references.	Influences a young voter to evaluate the information within the meme as reliable.



The final pair tested whether a young voter’s ideology matters when browsing political memes using Steven Crowder's "Change My Mind" Campus Sign template. The original meme featured conservative podcaster Steven Crowder seated behind a table with a sign which read, “Male Privilege is a myth / Change My Mind.” Since Crowder posted this picture of himself to his Twitter account in February 2018, the Internet quickly made him into a meme, easily photoshopping his sign to say anything along with the catchphrase, “change my mind” (Matt 2018). I chose this meme since it is meant to invite discussion or argument about an issue, as the person in the meme is asking the other person to change their mind.

I chose abortion as the topic of this pair since such a sensitive subject is usually straightforward for voters and typically invites highly polarized discourse, fitting into the meme’s form which is centered around the act of trying to change someone’s mind about an issue. But I also chose abortion because it is discussed using short and easily identifiable labels that fit into the meme. Pro-Choice is commonly associated with liberalism, while Pro-Life is commonly associated with conservatism. By only showing one of the memes to a voter, I was able to control the ideological cue for Bell that a voter received.

I hoped to find a positive correlation between Bell’s perceived ideology in this meme and the ideology of the recipient. Meme A in this pair listed Jonathan Bell as Pro-Choice. It had positive liberal cues and negative conservative cues. Meme B listed Bell as Pro-Life, with the inverse.

*Table 5: Hypothesis 4, Sharing, Feeling, and Reliability*

Hypothesis #4	Sharing	Feeling	Reliability
If the ideology of a candidate conveyed in a meme is similar to the ideology of a young voter, then that meme will...	Influence that voter to share it.	Influence that voter to like the candidate it references	Influence that voter to evaluate the information within it as reliable.

Table 6: Visual aide of the memes used in the experiment.


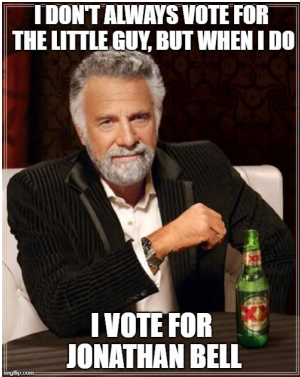





Tests for	Meme A	Meme B
<b>Control</b>		
<b>Form</b>	<p><i>Correct</i></p> 	<p><i>Incorrect</i></p> 
<b>Campaign attributes</b>	<p><i>With attributes</i></p> 	<p><i>Without attributes</i></p> 
<b>Ideological cues</b>	<p><i>Liberal cues</i></p> 	<p><i>Conservative cues</i></p> 

Table 7: Summary of the content, form, and stance of each meme in the experiment.

Meme	Content	Form	Stance (participation structure; keying; communicative function)
Control meme	Neutral	Neutral	None
The Most Interesting Man in the World, A	Neutral	Correct	Encourages voting; positive; conative
The Most Interesting Man in the World, B	Neutral	Incorrect	Encourages voting; positive motivation; conative
Daily Struggle, A	Neutral	Correct	Encourages voting, visit campaign website; humorous; conative, phatic.
Daily Struggle, B	Neutral	Correct	Encourages voting; humorous; conative.
Change My Mind, A	Liberal	Correct	Encourages discourse; informal, mockery; conative, phatic, metalingual.
Change My Mind, B	Conservative	Correct	Encourages discourse; informal, mockery; conative, phatic, metalingual.

### Procedure

After creating the memes to be used in the experiment, the next step was to make a survey that would introduce the meme in an organic manner to the participants and then proceed to ask questions about its effect. The participants were students from Dr. Stephen Voss' American Government course (PS 101) at the University of Kentucky. Their cooperation was required as part of a University core requirement to interact with political science research. Dr. Voss integrated my memes and survey questions into the Canvas learning management system

employed by the university as a quiz for 159 of his students, meaning each meme appeared in the experiment approximately 21 times.

It was critical for my memes to be introduced “naturally” – meaning, in an online environment and in as much of an organic manner as possible – since they were created using popular Internet meme templates. In doing so, I hoped to avoid the dreaded “forced meme” association that may have occurred if the memes were introduced in another medium, such as on paper. One meme appeared at random at the bottom of an online classroom quiz given by Dr. Voss and then asked students how likely they would be to share its information about political candidate Jonathan Bell.

The survey asked questions regarding the student’s Internet consumption, social media usage, and how often they shared and encountered memes. These questions were meant to measure how familiar a student may be with memes and meme culture, which could affect their feelings and actions toward the memes presented in the survey. The survey also asked about the student’s favorite social media site since some of those sites are more inclined towards memes, such as 4chan, and thus may affect their susceptibility toward memes in general.

Other questions in this section also included which medium a student normally consulted for political news. This was asked to catch any association between a student’s preferred communication method and their feelings as influenced by the meme as a medium. By knowing a student’s average time spent on memes or in environments where memes are likely to occur, I hoped to be able to make assumptions about the relationship between a student’s prior experience with internet memes and political communication, and whether those factors had an effect on the influence of the memes in the survey.

Then the survey asked more specific questions that were dependent on the meme the student received. These questions included how reliable the student perceived the information found in the meme to be, what they thought Bell's stances were on abortion and minimum wage, and whether they would consider voting for Bell in the next congressional election.

Finally, the survey asked demographic questions about the student including their age, sex, race, GPA, political ideology, and voting frequency at the three levels of government. I asked about political ideology using a 5-point scale ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative." This was done because the interaction between an individual's political ideology and the influence of a politically motivated meme is a crucial theory this study seeks to understand. The other demographic questions were meant to gather as many control variables as possible to allow for a deeper analysis on different types of voters. A broad array of demographic questions would help explain differences in groups of voters since young voters are most likely to engage with memes due to their social media consumption; since those with a higher GPA may be less likely to believe everything they see on an internet meme; since a liberal participant may be more inclined to like Bell if they believe he is also liberal.

Survey questions also included dummy questions to ensure each student was paying attention to the questions and not just clicking through the survey. Students who failed the dummy questions were allowed to retake the survey, but only the most recent response was used in the study. Students knew that while their responses would go to the researcher, their identities as participants would be known only to the professor. A copy of the survey questions relevant to the experiment and the available answers be found in the appendix.

## Data and Analysis

The experiment sought to test three main areas of a meme’s effectiveness: its ability to influence a respondent to share the meme, to like the candidate it references, and to evaluate the information within the meme as reliable. The measures of effectiveness are coded in the data as Sharing, Feeling, and Reliability, respectively.

### Sharing

When using a STATA contingency table, without controlling for ideology or other demographic factors, the data concerning a young voter’s willingness to share the memes in the experiment are overall not statistically significant. The p-value (indicated by Pr) is 0.393, meaning that patterns this weak, even if the null hypotheses were correct – sharing based on popularity of form (H1), incorrect usage of form (H2), campaign attributes (H3), and ideological cues within a meme (H4) – would be observed by chance in almost 40 percent of similar studies. None of these explanations accurately capture what influences a young voter to share a politically motivated meme. At a confidence level of 95 percent, the data as a whole on this particular measurement of a meme’s effectiveness are not statistically sound.

*Table 8: Individual Memes Did Not Produce Significant Results for Sharing*

Meme Received	Likelihood to share				Total
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Fairly Likely	Highly Likely	
Daily Struggle, A	21 91.30%	1 4.35%	0 0.00%	1 4.35%	23 100%
Daily Struggle, B	14 93.33%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 6.67%	15 100%
Control	20 95.24%	1 4.76%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	21 100%
Most Int. Man, A	21 84.21%	6 22.22%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	27 100%

Most Int. Man, B	16	3	0	0	19
	84.21%	15.79%	0.00%	0.00%	100%
Change My Mind, A	20	4	0	0	24
	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	100%
Change My Mind, B	23	5	1	0	29
	79.31%	17.24%	3.45%	0.00%	100%
Total	135	20	1	2	158
	85.44%	12.66%	0.63%	1.27%	100%
Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)		18.9886	Pr = 0.393		
Kendall's $t_b$		0.1229	ASE = 0.067		

But when taking into consideration the different demographics of the respondents, there is a clear correlation between a person’s tendency to share a meme at all and how often they encounter them. By creating contingency tables in STATA, the evolution of the relationship emerges – the more someone encounters memes, the more likely they are to share them. The p-value here is 0.0, indicating that a pattern this strong would very rarely, if ever, be observed as random chance. At a confidence level of 95 percent, the data concerning a person’s exposure to memes and how they interact with them are statistically significant.

Table 9: Strong Correlation Between A Person's Share Rate and Exposure Rate

How Often Respondent Shares Memes	How Often Respondent Encounters Memes					Total
	Never	0-1 Times	2-4 Times	5-7 Times	8+ Times	
Never	1 100.00%	3 42.86%	2 6.45%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	6 3.80%
Almost Never	0 0.00%	2 28.57%	5 16.13%	2 7.14%	3 3.30%	12 7.59%
1-2 Per Week	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	5 16.13%	5 17.86%	4 4.40%	14 8.86%
Few Per Week	0 0.00%	2 28.57%	7 22.58%	3 10.71%	14 15.38%	26 16.46%
1 Per Day	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	10 32.36%	6 21.43%	12 13.19%	28 17.72%
Several Times Per Day	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 6.45%	12 42.86%	58 63.74%	72 45.57%

Total	1	7	31	28	91	158
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Pearson's $\chi^2$ (4 d.f.)		103.274	Pr = 0.0			
Kendall's $t_b$		0.4564	ASE = 0.057			

After knowing what shapes a person’s overall likelihood to share a meme, I then created two other contingency tables in order to isolate the effect of two independent variables – how often the respondent typically shares memes (Share) and how often the respondents encounter memes (Encounter) – to see which one, if any, had the greatest effect on a person’s willingness to share the memes in the survey. Unfortunately, there were no statistically significant results. When considering the relationship between a person’s overall tendency to share memes and their willingness to share the memes in the survey, the p-value is 0.345; when considering the relationship between a person’s tendency to encounter memes and their willingness to share the memes in the survey, the p-value is 0.311. When held at a 95 percent confidence interval, neither of these two independent variables – how often a person regularly shares or encounters memes – appear to be a statistically significant indicator of whether a young voter would share politically motivated memes.

Table 10: A Respondent’s Rate of Share Did Not Improve Their Willingness to Share the Experimental Memes

How Often Respondent Shares Memes	Likelihood to Share				Total
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Fairly Likely	Highly Likely	
Never	5 3.70%	1 5.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	6 3.80%
Almost Never	11 8.15%	1 5.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	12 7.59%
1-2 Per Week	13 9.63%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 50.00%	14 8.86%
Few Per Week	23 17.04%	3 15.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	26 16.46%



1 Per Day	26 19.26%	1 5.00%	1 100.00%	0 1.00%	28 17.72%
Several Times Per Day	57 42.22%	14 70.00%	0 0.00%	1 50.00%	72 45.57%
Total	135 100.00%	20 100.00%	1 100.00%	2 100.00%	158 100.00%
Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)		16.5677	Pr = 0.345		
Kendall's $t_b$		0.1210	ASE = 0.070		

Table 11: A Respondent's Rate of Encounter Did Not Improve Their Willingness to Share the Experimental Memes

How Often Respondent Encounters Memes Daily	Likelihood to Share				Total
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Fairly Likely	Highly Likely	
Never	0 0.00%	1 5.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 0.63%
0-1 Times	7 5.19%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	7 4.43%
2-4 Times	26 19.26%	4 20.00%	1 100.00%	0 0.00%	31 19.62%
5-7 Times	24 17.78%	3 15.00%	0 0.00%	1 50.00%	28 17.72%
8+ Times	78 57.78%	12 60.00%	0 0.00%	1 50.00%	91 57.59%
Total	135 100.00%	20 100.00%	1 100.00%	2 100.00%	158 100.00%
Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)		13.8422	Pr = 0.311		
Kendall's $t_b$		-0.0124	ASE = 0.075		

Respondents with both a high rate of sharing and a high rate of encountering were not likely to share the memes in the experiment. However, when controlling for each variable separately in an ordered probit analysis, each had its own effect on the willingness of a respondent to share the memes in the experiment. I used an ordered probit analysis for this finding since it can be used for predicting variables that have few responses.

When controlling for how often a respondent encounters memes, those with a higher rate of sharing were more likely to share the memes in the experiment. This result suggests that having an underlying tendency to share memes did encourage the participants of this study to share the memes in the survey. I overlooked this pattern when analyzing the respondents' tendencies to share my memes in isolation because some of those likely to share admitted that they did not encounter memes very often, as indicated by their survey responses.

On the flip side of that pattern, thinking about the effect of encounter rates when controlling for propensity to share, the results suggest that respondents with a higher rate of encounter were less likely to share the memes in the experiment. Greater knowledge and exposure to memes presumably led to greater selectiveness. The pseudo R<sup>2</sup> for this analysis is 0.0514, meaning that although the results are not statistically significant, they do have a small ability to predict how respondents will react to political memes based on my results.

*Table 12: Relationship Between a Respondent's Share Rate and Encounter Rate, Ordered Probit Analysis*

Response	Coefficient	Std. Error	z	P >  z	[95% Confidence Interval]	
Encounter	-0.3483771	0.1822432	-1.91	0.056	-0.7055673	0.0088131
Share	0.2395445	0.1221902	1.96	0.050	0.0000562	0.4790328
Social Media Usage	0.1661587	0.1423604	1.17	0.243	-0.1128625	0.4451799
Gender	-0.2372582	0.2737172	0.87	0.386	-0.7737340	0.2992176
Race	0.3488289	0.3664226	0.95	0.341	-0.3693462	1.0670040
Favorite - Twitter	0.1428961	0.2872452	0.50	0.619	-0.4200942	0.7058864
Favorite - Instagram	-0.4715291	0.3735687	1.26	0.207	-1.2037100	0.2606520
Favorite - Snapchat	0.1298965	0.4344706	0.30	0.765	-0.7216503	0.9814432
<i>cutpoint 1</i>	<i>1.096558</i>	<i>0.6020561</i>			-0.0834503	2.276566
<i>cutpoint 2</i>	<i>2.157361</i>	<i>0.6251902</i>			0.9320108	3.382711
<i>cutpoint 3</i>	<i>2.340268</i>	<i>0.6388471</i>			1.088151	3.592385
Observations			157			
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>			0.0514			

After gaining an understanding of what influences a respondent to share a meme in their everyday life, looking at the individual results becomes easier. First, I hypothesized that the more popular a meme’s form, the better chances it had to persuade a young voter to share it (H1). Unfortunately, as exemplified in Table 8 above, popularity of form was not a determining factor in sharing the memes in the experiment.

Next, I hypothesized that a meme which uses the incorrect form, as exemplified by an incorrect usage of a template’s established punchline, will deter a young voter from sharing a meme (H2). Although the p-value for the pair testing correct form is 0.588, meaning the pattern is not statistically significant, I would still predict that respondents preferred the meme with the correct punchline. With a bigger sample size, something more may be able to be said about a meme’s correct form and about who or what defines “correctness” for an internet meme.

Table 13: Results for H2, Correct vs Incorrect Form

Meme Received	Likelihood to Share				Total
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Fairly Likely	Highly Likely	
Most Int. Man, A	21 77.78%	6 22.22%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	19 100.00%
Most Int. Man, B	16 84.21%	3 15.79%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	27 100.00%
Total	37 80.43%	9 19.57%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	46 100.00%
Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)		0.2932	Pr = 0.588		
Kendall's $t_b$		0.0798	ASE = 0.143		

Then, I hypothesized that a meme with direct campaign attributes, such as a campaign message or a more direct call to mobilize, are more likely to influence a young voter to share the meme (H3). However, the results reject this hypothesis as well. Respondents who received the Daily Struggle meme with a campaign message were not more likely to share the meme than those who received the version without a campaign message, suggesting that a campaign

message does not influence a voter to share a politically motivated meme. The p-value for this result is 0.688, which is far too great for statistical significance.

Table 14: Results for H3, Campaign Attributes vs No Campaign Attributes

Meme Received	Likelihood to Share				Total
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Fairly Likely	Highly Likely	
Daily Struggle, A	21 91.30%	1 4.35%	0 0.00%	1 4.35%	23 100.00%
Daily Struggle, B	14 93.33%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 6.67%	15 100.00%
Total	35 92.11%	1 2.63%	0 0.00%	2 5.26%	38 100.00%
Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)		0.7490	Pr = 0.688		
Kendall's $t_b$		-0.0312	ASE = 0.158		

Finally, I hypothesized that when a meme emits the same ideology as a young voter, that voter would be more likely to share the meme (H4). However, when liberal respondents received the Pro-Choice Change my Mind meme, they were not more likely to share it as indicated by a p-value of 0.328. Likewise, when conservative respondents received the Pro-Life version of the meme, they were equally not likely to share it as indicated by a p-value of 0.088. Both of these values do not hold up to a 95 percent confidence level, although the results of a conservative voter’s likelihood to share the conservative meme are approaching statistical significance at a 90 percent confidence level. Based on the data, the ideology of a meme does not interact with the ideology of a voter to influence their decision on whether to share a politically motivated meme, however, with a larger sample size, a pattern could emerge regarding conservative voters.

Table 15: Results for H4, if the Respondent Received Change My Mind Pro-Choice

Respondent's Ideology	Likelihood to Share				Total
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Fairly Likely	Highly Likely	
Very Conservative	2 50.00%	2 50.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	4 100%
Conservative	5 83.33%	1 16.67%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	6 100%
Moderate	5 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	5 100%
Liberal	6 85.71%	1 14.29%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	7 100%
Very Liberal	2 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 100%
Total	20 83.33%	4 16.67%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	24 100%
Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)		4.6286	Pr = 0.328		
Kendall's $t_b$		-0.277	ASE = 0.186		

Table 16: Results for H4, if the Respondent Received Change My Mind Pro-Life

Respondent's Ideology	Likelihood to Share				Total
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Fairly Likely	Highly Likely	
Very Conservative	3 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	3 100%
Conservative	6 85.71%	1 14.29%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	7 100%
Moderate	6 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	6 100%
Liberal	7 77.78%	1 11.11%	1 11.11%	0 0.00%	9 100%
Very Liberal	1 25.00%	3 75.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	4 100%
Total	23 27.31%	5 17.24%	1 3.45%	0 0.00%	29 100%
Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)		13.7575	Pr = 0.088		
Kendall's $t_b$		0.3757	ASE = 0.137		

## Feeling

The second measure of a meme's effectiveness in this study was Feeling. I sought to measure which characteristics of a political internet meme influenced a young voter to like or

dislike the candidate it referenced. Similar to the overall findings of a young voter's likelihood to share the memes in the experiment, there were no overall statistically significant results regarding their feeling toward the candidate depicted in the meme. The popularity of a meme's form (H1), the incorrect usage of a meme's form (H2), the presence of campaign attributes (H3), and compatible ideology between the meme and its recipient (H4) did not produce statistically significant results.

However, it is worth mentioning that the p-value of H2 is 0.067, implying that the incorrect usage of a meme's form may deter a voter from having a positive feeling toward the candidate it represents. Although the p-value is still too large to withstand a 95 percent confidence level, it is the p-value closest to alpha concerning a voter's Feeling. Future studies may wish to revisit this hypothesis with a larger sample size as it may offer insight regarding the gatekeeping effect.

*Table 17: Results of H2, if Respondent Received Most Interesting Man, A*

Respondent's Ideology	Feeling Toward Candidate					Total
	Strongly Dislike	Mildly Dislike	Neutral	Mildly Like	Strongly Like	
Very Conservative	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	5 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0%	5 100%
Conservative	0 0.00%	3 50.00%	3 50.00%	0 0.00%	0 0%	6 100%
Moderate	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	3 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0%	3 100%
Liberal	0 0.00%	1 11.11%	8 88.89%	0 0.00%	0 0%	9 100%
Very Liberal	1 25.00%	0 0.00%	2 50.00%	1 25.00%	0 0%	4 100%
Total	1 3.70%	4 14.81%	21 77.78%	1 3.70%	0 0%	27 100%
Pearson's $\chi^2$ (4 d.f.)		20.0179	Pr = 0.067			
Kendall's $\tau_b$		0.077	ASE = 0.198			

Reliability

The third measurement of a meme’s effectiveness in this experiment was Reliability. Reliability was defined by the question, how reliable does a young voter evaluate the information given in the meme? In the survey, the specific question given to the participants asked them to rate their current level of knowledge about Jonathan Bell on a scale ranging from “Mostly Unreliable” to “Highly Reliable.” Again, the individual characteristics of the memes themselves did not produce any statistically significant results. The popularity of a meme’s form (H1), the incorrect usage of a meme’s form (H2), the presence of campaign attributes (H3), and compatible ideology between the meme and its recipient (H4) did not affect whether a voter would believe the information conveyed in the meme as accurate.

But, just as in the results of both Sharing and Feeling, Reliability was most strongly influenced by the demographics of the respondents rather than the characteristics of the meme. Three statistically significant results emerged as a result. First, gender had an effect on a person’s willingness to evaluate their current level of knowledge about Bell as reliable. Females were much more likely to say their understanding of Bell was unreliable whereas males were more likely to say their understanding was reliable. This suggests that males are more confident in their understanding of political information. The p-value for this finding is 0.047, meaning that at a 95 percent confidence interval, the results are statistically significant.

*Table 18: Males are More Likely to Believe the Information Within an Internet Meme*

Gender	Current Knowledge About Candidate			Total
	Mostly Unreliable	Somewhat Reliable	Fairly Reliable	
Male	33 45.83%	30 41.67%	9 12.50%	72 100.00%
Female	54 63.53%	27 31.76%	4 4.71%	85 100.00%

Total	87 55.41%	57 36.31%	13 8.28%	157 100.00%
Pearson's $\chi^2$ (4 d.f.)		6.115	Pr = 0.047	
Kendall's $\tau_b$		-0.1865	ASE = 0.076	

Second, since all of the participants in the experiment were college students with an interest in political science, the survey also asked each respondent to self-report their grade point average (GPA) using an interval method. Possible answer choices for this question ranged from “Below a 2.0” to “3.8 – 4.0.” Respondents with a higher GPA, described as being a 3.4 and above, were more likely to recognize that their current understanding of my fictitious candidate was unreliable. Those with a lower GPA, described as being a 3.39 and below, were more likely to evaluate their understanding as somewhat or fairly reliable. The p-value for this finding is 0.010, being a statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence interval. Therefore, the data suggests that those with a better understanding of politics are more skeptical of the information they see, whereas those with a lesser understanding are more likely to believe an internet meme.

*Table 19: Those with a Higher GPA Are More Skeptical of Their Understanding of the Candidate*

Self-reported GPA	Current Knowledge About Candidate			Total
	Mostly Unreliable	Somewhat Reliable	Fairly Reliable	
Below a 2.0	2 100.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 100.00%
2.0 - 2.49	7 53.85%	6 46.15%	0 0.00%	13 100.00%
2.5 - 2.99	10 35.71%	11 39.29%	7 25.00%	28 100.00%
3.0 - 3.39	20 47.62%	19 45.24%	3 7.14%	42 100.00%
3.4 - 3.59	9 50.00%	8 44.44%	1 5.56%	18 100.00%
3.6 - 3.79	19 70.37%	7 25.93%	1 3.70%	27 100.00%
3.8 - 4.0	21 77.78%	6 22.22%	0 0.00%	27 100.00%
Total	88 56.05%	57 36.31%	12 7.64%	157 100.00%



Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)	26.259	Pr = 0.010
Kendall's $t_b$	-0.2160	ASE = 0.064

Finally, race also played a role in a person’s self-reported knowledge about fictional candidate Jonathan Bell. White respondents were statistically more skeptical of their knowledge about Bell than black respondents. The p-value for this finding is 0.039, meaning the data are statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence interval.

Table 20: Whites Are More Skeptical of Information Within an Internet Meme Than Blacks

Race	Current Knowledge About Candidate			Total
	Mostly Unreliable	Somewhat Reliable	Fairly Reliable	
Black	10 41.67%	9 37.50%	5 20.83%	24 100.00%
White	78 58.21%	48 35.82%	8 5.97%	134 100.00%
Total	88 55.70%	57 36.08%	13 8.23%	158 100.00%

Pearson's $c^2$ (4 d.f.)	6.481	Pr = 0.039
Kendall's $t_b$	-0.1486	ASE = 0.083

However, race is not the determining factor; the effect disappears when controlling for gender, GPA, and general familiarity with social media as illustrated by a new p-value of 0.282 for race in the following ordered probit analysis.

Table 21: Race Becomes Less Significant When Controlled for Gender, GPA, and Familiarity with Memes

Knowledge	Coefficient	Std. Error	z	P >  z	[95% Confidence Interval]	
GPA	-0.1638952	0.0665855	-2.46	0.014	-0.2944005	-0.0333900
Female	-0.4446363	0.2068730	-2.15	0.032	-0.8500999	-0.0391728
White	-0.2975793	0.2764326	-1.08	0.282	-0.8393773	0.2442187
Social Media Usage	0.0151679	0.1199723	0.13	0.899	-0.2199735	0.2503093
Encounter	-0.1079849	0.1092213	-0.99	0.323	-0.3220547	0.1060848
cutpoint 1	-1.242957	0.5306778			-2.283067	-0.2028478

<i>cutpoint 2</i>	<i>0.1522686</i>	<i>0.5264305</i>	<i>-0.8795162</i>	<i>1.184053</i>
Observations		156		
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>		0.0637		

## Discussion

Although there are statistically significant findings present in the experiment, it should be noted that there were limitations to my study that could be masking more information about the influence of political internet memes on young voters. For example, the sample sizes used in the experiment were usually too small to be conclusive. Although there were patterns, there just were not enough respondents to make concrete conclusions about their responses to different memes. Also concerning the respondents, it should be of note that the participants in the experiment were not a representative sample of all young voters. Each participant in the study had at least some level of college education and a general interest in Political Science as students in an introductory course to American Government.

If my study were to be revisited, it may be of interest to reconsider sample size and the participants' prior knowledge and interest in government affairs. Furthermore, the introduction of memes in the survey could be edited as well. Given my constraints as an undergraduate, I did not have access to advanced software allowing a creative construction of survey questions or a more organic introduction of the experimental memes. I would encourage future researchers to consider the danger of "forced meme"(Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) applications which I suspect had an influence on the overall lack of statistically sound results related to the characteristics of the memes themselves.

Finally, it should also be noted that my study was focused on the characteristics of memes as communications media and visual rhetoric. Therefore, my research concentrated on individual aspects of memes, usually relying upon explanations of form or applications of memes as vehicles of communication or expression. As such, I do not have substantial reflections on the statistically significant findings of my experiment since those findings were dependent on the characteristics of the voter and not the meme. Future research may be more fortunate if the focus shifts from what makes a meme effective to what makes a voter more likely to be affected.

## Conclusion

Cambridge Analytica has a valid point: there is a greater payoff when one values the personalities of their base above all else. Even though internet memes have potential as instruments of political communication, the data of this experiment suggests that their effectiveness relies less on their construction as tools of rhetoric and more on the personality of their viewer. All four of the significant findings of this study were not influenced by the characteristics of the memes, but rather the characteristics of their recipients. Prior exposure and interaction with internet memes, gender, race, and grade point average were the determining factors for a person's susceptibility to the rhetoric contained within the memes in the experiment.

As such, the data suggests that the best chance a candidate has to influence a young voter through internet memes is to spend less time choosing an image macro and more time learning about the electorate. Even though we have evidence of memes being used as political expression or for organizational purposes, perhaps their effectiveness is not so black and white – whether they are shared and believed may be looking in the wrong direction. If internet memes want to

be treated as a form of communicative media, scholars first need to understand to whom memes communicate and why.

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We bleed blue where I’m from.

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## Appendix

Transcription of the survey received by students in Dr. Stephen Voss' Spring 2018 American Government course

*Only questions and answers relevant to the survey have been transcribed.*

### Meme Consumption

**On a typical day, how often do you encounter memes?**

- 0 - 1 time
- 2 - 4 times
- 5 - 7 times
- 8+ times

I do not know what a meme is

**Do you sometimes share memes or tag your friends in them?**

- Yes, several times per day
- Yes, maybe once per day
- Yes, maybe a few times per week
- Yes, once or at most twice a week
- Almost never
- No, I do not



Meme Exposure (Control Meme example)

The following is a meme produced on behalf of congressional candidate Jonathan Bell. How likely would you be to share this image with others?



Not likely

Somewhat Likely

Fairly Likely

Highly Likely

Candidate Reactions

*Heard of Bell*

**Before today, had you heard of congressional candidate Jonathan Bell?**

Yes

No

*Reliability*

**How would you describe your current level of knowledge about congressional candidate Jonathan Bell, in terms of reliability?**

Mostly unreliable

Somewhat reliable

Fairly reliable

Highly reliable

*Abortion Question*

**Based on everything you might know or have heard, what is your best guess as to where candidate Jonathan Bell stands on abortion?**

Wants to loosen restrictions on abortion

Wants to protect abortion rights as they now stand

Wants to add modest restrictions on abortion rights

Wants to ban abortion except in cases of rape or incest

Wants a total ban on abortion

I cannot even make an informed guess

*Wage Question*

**Based on everything you might know or have heard, what is your best guess as to where candidate Jonathan Bell stands on the minimum wage?**

Wants to lower it to \$5 per hour

Wants to keep it at \$7.25 per hour

Wants to increase it to \$9 per hour

Wants to increase it to \$10.10 per hour

Wants to increase it to \$15 per hour

I cannot even make an informed guess

*Candidate Feels*

**Based on what you know of congressional candidate Jonathan Bell, how do you think you feel toward that candidate?**

Strongly Dislike

Mildly Dislike

Feel Neutrally

Mildly Like

Strongly Like

**If you were going to participate in the congressional election, do you think you would consider voting for a candidate like Jonathan Bell?**

Would not consider

Unlikely to consider

Might consider

Likely to consider

Would highly consider

Demographics Part I

**What is your current age?**

Write-in answer.

**What is your biographical sex?**

Write-in answer.

**What is your race or ethnicity? (Please answer all that apply.)**

White

Black

Latino

Middle Eastern

Asian or Pacific Islander

Native American

**Approximately what is your overall GPA at UK so far, using one decimal space (rounding as necessary)?**

3.8 - 4.0

3.6 - 3.79

3.4 - 3.59

3.0 - 3.39

2.5 - 2.99

2.0 - 2.49

Below a 2.0

I don't have a UK GPA yet

Demographics Part II

**How would you classify your political ideology?**

Very liberal

Somewhat liberal

Moderate

Somewhat conservative

Very conservative

**Have you voted in at least one election – national, state, or local? Please indicate each type in which you've voted.**

National

State

Local

Never voted

**How do you normally receive information on political candidates? Select all that apply.**

Television

Radio

Newspaper

Magazine

Online

Podcasts

Social Media

YouTube

Word of Mouth

**Which of the following is your favorite?**

Facebook

Twitter

Reddit

4Chan

Tumblr

Instagram

Snapchat

**Which of the following do you access frequently?**

Facebook

Twitter

Reddit

4Chan

Tumblr

Instagram

Snapchat

**On a typical day, how many hours would you say you spend on social media?**

Never: I don't use social media

An hour or less

Maybe 1-2 hours

Between 2-4 hours

Between 4-8 hours

More than 8 hours per day

**Which of the following news sources do you know and trust?**

CNN

PBS

FOX

MSNBC

BBC

New York Times

Washington Post

Wall Street Journal

USA Today

Breitbart

Info Wars