

MENACING MEMES? AFFECT AND EFFECTS OF POLITICAL INTERNET MEMES

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Internet Memes and Politics

Scholarship demonstrates that internet memes – digital-media based, intertextual, participatory creations – are polyvocal, political discourse (Milner, 2012) and grassroots action and advocacy (Shifman, 2014). In democratic and nondemocratic societies, citizens use memes to react, critique, protest, and speak truth to power.

Political memes are used to critique and comment on social and political issues, from elections, to food stamps, police violence and issues of equality. One example of such political memes, Binders Full of Women, used pop culture references to critique 2012 U.S. Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's words, and to comment on workplace equality and how women are viewed in the United States.

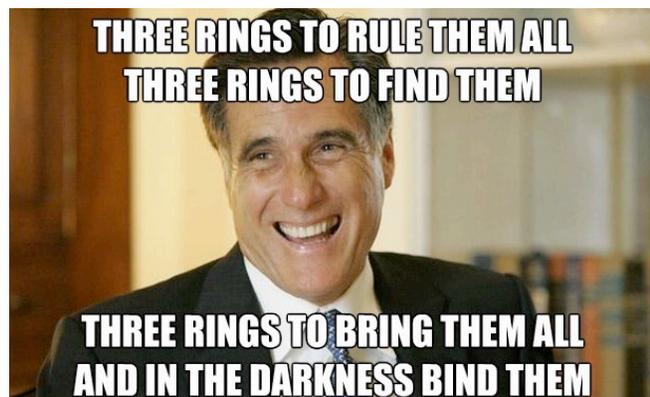
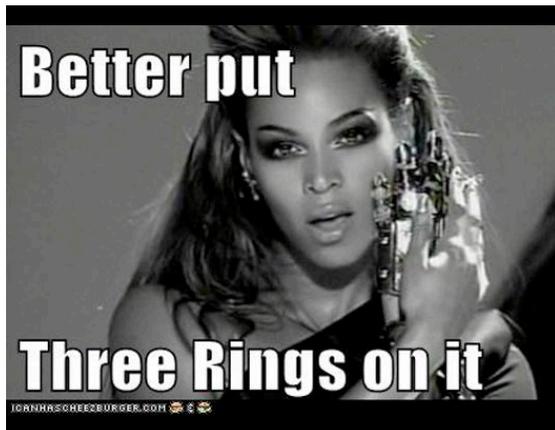


Figure 1 Two examples of the Binders Full of Women meme that referenced pop culture to make a rhetorical point.

Because of their participatory nature, political or activist memes have been celebrated for offering new avenues for political discourse and participation. While much of the meme scholarship to date has focused on meme creators and the qualities of memes themselves, what is less clear are the effects such memes have on those who view

them and within society more broadly. It may be that memes have effects similar to other forms of political media, with implications for how viewers understand or think about particular issues or figures.

In a late November 2014 post for *The Spectator*, a long-running conservative British magazine, Isabel Hardman lamented the spread of a particular meme, the purpose of which was ostensibly to critique the British Parliament by highlighting MPs' lack of concern for social issues, in contrast to their over concern for their own benefits. In the post, headlined "The Menace of Memes," Hardman traced the origins of photos used in the meme to argue that the memes were "deceitfully spreading lies" through a combination of out-of-context images and over-simplification of Parliament's processes (Hardman, 2014).



Figure 2 This example of the Parliament Debate meme was used to illustrate a news story about the debate (Russia Today, 2014).

Underlying Hardman's essay was the assumption that these memes contributed to viewers' understanding of the issue. While an interesting assumption, it is also an understudied one. Though the influence of media on politics has long been of interest to scholars, this research has been largely focused on traditional forms of media. With the rise of social media has come a blurred distinction regarding what counts as "media."

When nearly anyone can write a blog post or share a meme, it becomes necessary to understand how user-generated media influences politics. While this work has begun with studies of relationships between social media use and information-seeking or traditional political participation, there is more work yet to be done to understand how user-generated content, like internet memes, influence those who view them as media. By exploring this question of meme effects, this paper seeks to answer Shifman's (2014) call for future meme research to establish what constitutes an effect of memes and how such effects might be measured.

Affect, Memes, and Politics

In the case of the Parliament Debate meme, Hardman noted that the meme tapped into feelings of disgust or distrust toward politicians, arguing this connection contributed to viewers' uncritical take on the meme as they passed it on. Indeed, emotionality may be key to memes' spread (Shifman, 2014). This paper argues the emotionality embedded in and elicited by memes is a key to understanding memes' effects, especially in the realm of politics.

Feelings and emotions are components of affect (Lang & Dhillon, 2004), a powerful aspect of political cognition. Affect is demonstrated to influence political information seeking, participation, and opinion formation (Cassino & Lodge, 2007; Wyer, 2004). In fact, affect and cognition are intricately linked in political contexts (Redlawsk, 2002; Wyer, 2004). Wyer claimed that affective reactions influence judgments and behaviors by serving as a source of information about the "persons, objects, and events to which these reactions are directed" (2004, p. 363). Affect also influences politics through transfer or priming to an object of evaluation (Isbell, Ottati & Burns, 2006). Affect is also an outcome of viewing media. For instance, Dillard et al. (1996) demonstrated that fear appeals in television Public Service Announcements (PSAs) did, in fact, make people feel fearful. Affect, then, is both an outcome of viewing media and a moderator of effects of consuming media.

Method

To further explore the relationship between memes and affect in political contexts, preliminary research was conducted in advance of a larger research study. An online experiment was used to test a total of 24 political and non-political memes for affect and participant perceptions of the memes, and to look for possible differences in reactions to political and non-political memes. For participating in this online study, participants could choose to be entered into a raffle to win one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards.

College students ages 18 to 24 ($N = 100$) were drawn from the undergraduate population at a large university in the western United States in an area known for having high numbers of both conservative and liberal voters. After giving informed consent, participants were presented with 6 of the 24 memes, with each participant viewing a mixture of political and non-political memes in random order. The political memes depicted a variety of political issues and figures relevant to politics in the United States. Participants were asked to rate each individual meme for its political stance (conservative, liberal, or non-political), and to explain that choice in their own words.

Next, participants' emotional responses after viewing all of the memes were recorded using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). Participants also completed a thought-listing task asking for any of their thoughts as they were viewing the memes. To test whether thought-listing can influence emotional responses to memes by triggering deeper thinking about them, half of the participants completed the thought-listing task before the PANAS, and half completed the PANAS first. Participants were also asked to identify their own political ideology, beliefs and participation, as well as media use habits, including meme viewing and creating.

Data from this preliminary study will be assessed in order to refine a future study. It is also expected to illuminate how viewers perceive memes' content as media, and particularly political media, with implications for the role memes play as affective media in modern politics. The full presentation elaborates on the results of this research, including discussion of the most common emotional reactions to the memes as produced by the PANAS. Examples are provided, and the implications for politics and meme effects scholarship are discussed.

Conclusion

Because of memes' visual nature and the centrality of their ability to tap into emotions and feelings in their spread (Shifman, 2014), affect is a useful place to begin to understand political memes' potential effects as a form of media. If memes influence viewers' affect, such as emotions or feelings, this is an important step toward understanding the implications of such user-generated media for outcomes such as perceptions of political figures or issues. This paper represents preliminary research to establish memes' effects through the dimension of affect.

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