"Make A-meme-rica Great Again!": A Content Analysis of the Internet Memes within the #MAGA and #TRUMP2020 Network during the 2020 US Presidential Election on Twitter

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Via a content analysis of 491 internet memes posted within the #maga (abbreviated for Make America Great Again, the campaign slogan popularized by Donald Trump during his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns) and #trump2020 network on Twitter during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, this study determined (1) who did the memes target, (2) how were the targets portrayed in the memes, and (3) what were the main themes, or ideas, of the internet memes posted within the community. Findings suggested that the community surrounding the #maga and #trump2020 hashtags primarily employed internet memes to express grassroots support for Donald Trump, his allies, Republican politicians, and conservatives. At the same time, they attempted to create an unfavorable portrayal of Joe Biden, his allies, Democratic politicians, and liberals. Findings, as well as the political participation of internet memes during the election, were discussed.

Keywords: political communication, election, memes, social media, Twitter, framing, Donald Trump, MAGA

O n June 9, 2016, then-Republican nominee for the US presidential election, Donald J. Trump, criticized then-president of the United States Barack Obama on Twitter because the latter had publicly endorsed then-Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. In response, Hillary Clinton posted a tweet, "Delete your account," which is an internet meme (Berland, 2016; Collins, 2016). The tweet would eventually become the second-most retweeted political message of the year and Twitter's representative for the hashtag #Election2016.

In both the 2012 and 2016 U.S. presidential elections, Democrats and Republicans had employed internet memes as a means of online political campaigning and iconography to raise awareness, support, and funds from citizens (Foster, 2014; Zannettou et al., 2018). While the participation of social media and internet memes in political discourse, particularly during presidential elections, is not a novel phenomenon, their influence in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was unprecedented, exceeded previous limits, and indeed dwarfed the regular dominance of legacy media on public opinion. Then came 2020, the year in which Donald Trump orchestrated, during the presidential election, what was described by the media as "a media circus" of conspiracy theories designed to distract, exact revenge, and entertain (Autry, 2020; Pompeo, 2020; Rich, 2020; Trudo, 2020).

Figure 1. Hillary Clinton's tweet, an internet meme, was the second-most retweeted political message of 2016 and Twitter's representative for the hashtag #Election2016.

Social media has become a battlefield for information warfare in which entities attempt to disperse content to achieve strategic goals, push agendas, or fight ideological battles (Denning, 1999; Rowett, 2018). Nevertheless, the significance of internet memes, an integral aspect of communication on social media, to recent U.S. presidential elections and politics in general, might have been underestimated. Still, the primary political involvement of millions of American people during the 2016 presidential election "was limited to tweeting and retweeting snarky anti-Clinton or anti-Trump memes to like-minded individuals" (Ott, 2016). Despite increasingly becoming relevant and impactful, however, internet memes are still more often considered laughing matters rather than legitimate conveyors of information, and scholars have little understanding of their influence and propagation (Shifman, 2014; Zannettou et al., 2018).

Consequently, little literature exists to reflect the importance of internet memes to mass communications and society. The current study, the second of a two-part project (the first being Tran (2021)), aims to support the foundation for such literature. It builds on the theoretical framework of framing theory to fill in the gap by probing into the community of supporters of the incumbent Donald Trump, specifically the group of internet memers (an internet slang describing people who create or distribute memes) among them, on Twitter during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Via content

analysis of the internet memes created and disseminated by Trump supporters, the author aims to determine their targets and learn how memers among the community of Donald Trump supporters framed their memes and their targets. Findings shall be discussed, from which assessment, prediction, and serviceable data are provided in the hope that the study can contribute to building a solid foundation for future research concerning internet memes, social media, and political communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Framing Theory

The idea of frames and framing was first described by Bateson (1972) as a spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages, then further explained by Goffman (1974); framing can be understood as the practice of interpreting information within a familiar context. Druckman (2001) identified two distinct treatments of frames. Frames in thought, based on the groundwork laid by Goffman (1974), Kahneman and Tversky (2013), and Sweetser and Fauconnier (1996), refer to an individual's (cognitive) understanding of a given situation and what the individual sees as relevant to understanding a situation. On the other hand, frames in communication, following Gitlin (1980), Iyengar (1991), and Jamieson and Cappella (1997), refer to the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that an informant uses when relaying information to another. The chosen frame may, in turn, express what the informant sees as relevant to the topic at hand.

In mass communication, the framing theory refers to how the media chooses to package and present information to the public, i.e., "the frame" through which messages are delivered to the audiences that may influence their choice-making process (Baran & David, 2011; Hallahan, 2008; Littlejohn & Foss, 2010). Frames have several locations, including the communicator, the text, the receiver, the culture; they are integral to a process of framing that consists of distinct stages: frame-building, frame-setting, and individual and societal level consequences of framing (D'Angelo, 2002; De Vreese, 2003; Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 2000). De Vreese (2005) perceived communication as a dynamic process involving frame-building (i.e., how frames emerged) and frame-setting (i.e., the interplay between media frames and audience predispositions).

The notion of framing has gained momentum in communication disciplines, especially in media analysis and media-effects research (DeVreese, 2005; Nwabueze & Egbra, 2016). Scholars have extensively applied the framing theory to examine virtually every aspect of news coverage, including politics. For example, De Vreese, Peter, and Semetko (2001) posited that while reporting political and economic news, journalists focused more on framing conflict rather than economic consequences. Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2010) dug deeper into the coverage of political elections in the media, considering commercialism as the driving force behind the framing of politics, and the type of media mattered when it came to the meta-framing of politics. Commercial news media and tabloids were more likely to frame politics as a game instead of issues compared to public service news media and quality newspapers, respectively.

Regarding the framing in political communication on social media, Hemphill, Culotta, and Heston (2013) found members of the U.S. Congress to actively use social media, viz Twitter, to frame issues by choosing topics to discuss and employing explicit hashtags to highlight aspects of the topics. They also posited that those politicians spent their best efforts to frame recognizably divisive issues such

as healthcare, jobs, energy policy, equal pay, and immigration. Furthermore, voting patterns generally aligned with tweeting patterns, i.e., U.S. politicians tweeted and voted along the same polarized lines.

During environmental protests against the operation of the Cerattepe gold mine in Turkey in 2016, the protest network on social media adopted the framing of political economic and environmental justice. Those frames indeed fostered stable connections between activist groups (Doğu, 2019). Findings on the 2014 Colombian presidential election suggested a radical difference between the focus of journalists and the public on Twitter. While journalists paid attention to the issue frame (i.e., fundamental socioeconomic and political concerns), the public was more interested in the conflict frame (i.e., conflicts between individuals, groups, or institutions). Likewise, while journalists employed the hate frame, the public attended to the peace frame (Garcia-Perdomo, 2017).

Internet Memes and the Scholarship of Memes

The term "meme" was coined by the English ethologist, evolutionary biologist, and author Richard Dawkins in his 1976 acclaimed publication, The selfish gene. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "meme" as "a cultural element or behavioral trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene." Meanwhile, an internet meme is "an image, a video, a piece of text typically humorous in nature that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations."

Memes can be found in virtually every place and space in the modern world, including but not limited to social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter), forums (e.g., Reddit, 4chan), user-generated video and micro-video platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, or the now-archived Vine), random websites on the internet, television series, news reports, postcards, or printed image-macros at parties. The possibility of memes' interpretation is endless, but eventually, they mean whatever their conjurers want them to mean (Nuzziu, 2017).

Despite an often lack of seriousness, internet memes are a unique product of the current digital culture that typifies many of its underlying qualities; they, to an extent, have been playing a vital part in defining and shaping the twenty-first century (Shifman, 2014). While having been leaping into the broad daylight of public recognition at a quick and steady pace, memes and internet memes are still the subject of heated and constant academic debate between enthusiastic apostles and dismissive skeptics, as well as the target of derision and sometimes outright dismissal (Aunger, 2000; Shifman, 2012; Shifman, 2014). There is, in fact, memetics, the study of information and culture describing how an idea can be propagated based on a Darwinism analogy; however, it has been contended by critics as untested, unsupported, and incorrect (Kantorovich, 2014; Marks, 2002; Polichak, 2000).

Internet Memes in Political Discourse

The humorous nature of memes indeed makes them an ideal venue for political critique and commentary, as humor has been a method for skewering both people and institutions in the highest echelons of power (Miltner, 2018). Zannettou et al. (2018) believed internet memes, apart from their usual humorous intention, have been weaponized to sway and manipulate public opinion; they can be considered one of the most impactful media for propagation in the modern world as their popularity gradually increases. It is not difficult to recognize the rapidly growing presence of internet memes within political contexts.

Bebić and Volarevic (2018) posited that *Ćaća se vraća* (*The Father is Coming Back*), a sarcastic Facebook initiative, successfully employed internet memes to influence the way the media portrayed Ivo

Sanader, the former convicted prime minister of Croatia. Sanader was presented usually positively and as a problem solver on *Ćaća se vraća*. Chagas, Freire, Rios, and Magalhães (2019) argued that during the 2014 elections in Brazil, Dilma Rousseff and Aécio Neve were candidates who most profited from persuasive memes. Eduardo Jorge, an outsider candidate dubbed "The King of Memes" due to his performances during the debates, exaggerated gestures, funny responses, and atypical behaviors, was also the character of many political internet memes, particularly those about grassroots actions and public discussions.

During the anti-government protests in Ukraine between 2013 and 2014 and in Venezuela in 2019, both pro- and anti-government communities took advantage of internet memes' visual appeal and memorability to gain influence and propagate their political agendas (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020). In both countries, internet memes were revealed to be used by anti-government communities to articulate forms of creative critique, symbolic resistance against the regime, or a coping mechanism and tended to incite positive emotions. Their counterparts, on the other hand, employed internet memes for polarization and propagation, using strong affective stimuli to mobilize the audience. Findings also highlighted that neo-authoritarian regimes had been increasingly adopting internet memes as a communicative measure against protest activities.

On social media, state-sponsored accounts have been known to utilize the expressive power of images and pictures (i.e., using politically and ideologically imbued internet memes) to advance agendas (Rowett, 2018; Zannettou, Caulfield, Bradlyn, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, & Blackburn, 2020). For example, Zannettou et al. (2020) analyzed a dataset of 8 million images from the 9 million tweets released by Twitter in October 2018 that, according to the social networking service, had been posted by 3.6 thousand accounts identified as being controlled by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA). The study suggested that internet memes, while some were meant to be funny, possessed strong political nature and were exploited by the accounts mentioned above to disseminate their ideology.

The internet memes sharing pattern, interestingly, coincides with real-world events, further indicating the accounts' intention to create discord during dividing events. Those campaigns were effective since they evoked a strong emotional response with a stark partisan divide that drove consumers' behaviors; thus, misinformation and disinformation, some expressed in the form of internet memes, could rapidly spread throughout social media channels (Todd, James, Marek, & Danielle, 2020). The spread of political internet memes, which does not necessarily follow an S-shaped dynamic, contrasts with typical findings of the literature regarding the diffusion of information. Instead, memes can either focus on idiosyncratic political issues, hence capturing high levels of attention in a short amount of time. They, on the other hand, can include established themes routinely discussed throughout the legislative process, in which case the dynamics conform to a linear fashion (Gurciullo, Herzog, John, & Mikhaylov, 2015). The combination of dialogue and conflict in political memes is indeed a critical element that increases the popularity of a meme and thus makes it viral (Lukianova, Shteynman, & Fell, 2019).

Still, Dean (2019) suggested that the attitude of political science towards social media and digital politics had long been an unease, or even squeamishness, which hindered their ability to appreciate the texture and character of contemporary digitally mediated politics. Political scientists, therefore, should perceive the production and exchange of digital visual media, notably internet memes, not as some

frivolous activity on the margins of politics but as increasingly central to the everyday practices of politically engaged citizens.

The literature review highlighted the essential position of internet memes not only in media scholarship but also in political participation in the real world. Thus, it is crucial to understand how memes are bundled and delivered to serve particular purposes, especially in a political context of a presidential election. The study, therefore, proposes the following research questions and hypothesis:

RQ1: How were Donald Trump and his allies portrayed in internet memes during the 2020 US presidential election?

RQ2: How were Joe Biden and his allies portrayed in internet memes during the 2020 US presidential election?

H1: There is a significant difference in the portrayals of Donald Trump and Joe Biden in internet memes during the 2020 US presidential election.

METHODS

The study referred to a corpus of 33,558 tweets containing either the hashtags #maga or #trump2020 and posted between October 27 and November 2, 2020 (i.e., one week before the general election day). The corpus was collected via 4CAT, a software suite designed to capture and analyze the contents of various thread-based platforms, created and run by OILab at the University of Amsterdam (Peeters & Hagen, 2018). While #maga and #trump2020 were often affiliated with Donald Trump and his community of supporters during the 2020 US presidential election, the timeframe was chosen because a drastic surge in the number of tweets posted by political candidates, their affiliations, and their supporters are generally expected before the election day (Kruikemeier, 2014).

Four hundred and ninety-one unique memes were randomly selected from the corpus of tweets for analysis (N = 491). The goal was to determine (1) who did the memes target, (2) how the targets were portrayed in the memes, and (3) what were the main themes, or ideas, of the memes posted within the community of Trump supporters. A codebook, adapted from Foster (2014) and Chagas, Freire, Rios, and Magalhães (2019) can be found in Appendix A.

Intercoder Reliability

Two coders performed the coding process. Krippendorff's α coefficient for intercoder reliability on 50 memes (i.e., approximately 10% of the sample) indicated strong results: .878 for type of political memes, .939 for portrayal, and 1 for offensive words, target, extremist affiliation, and sentiment (Freelon, 2013).

Results

Donald Trump, his allies, Republican politicians, or conservatives (i.e., "the Trump side") were portrayed in 343 memes (69.86%) while Joe Biden, his allies, Democratic politicians, or liberals (i.e., "the Biden side") were the targets of 141 memes (28.72%). The target of 7 memes could not be identified or clarified. Two hundred memes (40.73%) were grassroots action memes, 157 memes (31.98%) were persuasive memes, and 134 memes (27.29%) were public discussion memes. Only 28 memes (5.7%) contained one or more offensive words; offensive language can be used to signify emotions such as anger, frustration, joy, or surprise (Jay, 2009).

The analysis focused on the memes' general sentiment, portrayal of the target, inclusion of extremist affiliations, and type to answer the research questions regarding how Donald Trump, Joe

Biden, and their respective allies were portrayed in the internet memes posted within the #maga and #trump2020 networks during the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Figure 2. A photo wall consists of 120 memes (not unique) collected from a corpus of 33,558. tweets containing either the hashtags #maga or #trump2020 and posted between October 27 and November 2, 2020.

General Sentiment. There was a significant association between the memes' target and their sentiment, χ^2 (4, 491) = 430.36, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .66. The sentiment towards the Biden side was predominantly negative (in 134 memes, or 95%), while the sentiment towards the Trump side was mostly positive (in 277 memes, or 80.8%).

Table 1

Crosstabulation regarding the association between the memes' target and their sentiment

	Negative		Neutral		Positive	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
The Biden side	134	95	0	0	7	5
The Trump side	52	15.2	14	4.1	277	80.8
Unspecified	0	0	7	100	0	0
Total	186	37.9	21	4.3	284	57.8

χ^2 (4, 491) = 430.36, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .66.

Portrayals of the Target. A significant association between the memes' target and their portrayal was indicated, χ^2 (8, 491) = 450.67, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .68. The community of Trump supporters on Twitter used memes primarily to support Donald Trump and his side as they were framed under the politician (or the ideal candidate) and the populist 182 times (53.1%) and 96 times (28%), respectively. On the other hand, Trump supporters framed Joe Biden and his side as the loser (or the incapable) and the menace (or the criminal) 59 times (41.8%) and 75 times (53.2%), respectively. Donald Trump was also a target of dissent, although much less frequently than Joe Biden; he was

portrayed as the loser (or the incapable) 35 times (10.2%) and the menace (or the criminal) 19 times (5.5%).

Table 1

Crosstabulation regarding the association between the memes' target and their portrayal

	The politician, or the ideal candidate		The populist		The loser, or the incapable		The menace, or the criminal		Other	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The Biden side	4	2.8	2	1.4	59	41.8	75	53.2	1	.7
The Trump side	182	53.1	96	28	35	10.2	19	5.5	11	3.2
Unspecified	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	100
Total	186	37.9	98	20	94	19.1	94	19.1	19	3.9

χ^2 (8, 491) = 450.67, p < .001, Cramer's V = .68.

Opposers of Donald Trump focused their criticism on Trump's failures, incapability, improper acts, and imprudent remarks during his presidential term. They also accused him of spreading hate, discrimination, and fake news, as well as being lawless and a liar. Those who were against Joe Biden, on the other hand, based their arguments on several common claims. For instance, they branded the former vice-president a pedophile, a puppet of the Chinese Communist Party, or a disappointment who had achieved nothing in his political career. They also launched personal attacks towards people around Biden; for example, they directed their aggression toward Hunter Biden, Joe Biden's son, on his alleged connection with the Ukrainian government and drug addiction.

Inclusion of Extremist Affiliations. As described in Appendix A, "extremist affiliations" refers to whether the target was portrayed along with, or attached to, symbols or implications of extremist affiliations in the memes. There was a significant association between the memes' target and the extremist affiliations portrayed along with them, χ^2 (6, 491) = 61.37, p < .001, Cramer's V = .25. The Biden side was more often associated with left-wing extremist affiliations (e.g., communism or anarchism), while the Trump side was more often portrayed along with right-wing extremist affiliations (e.g., fascism, Nazism, or white supremacism).

Table 2

Crosstabulation regarding the association between the memes' target and extremist affiliations

	No extremist affiliations		Left-wing extremist affiliations		Right-wing extremist affiliations		Other extremist affiliations	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The Biden side	108	76.6	23	16.3	1	.7	9	6.4
The Trump side	315	91.8	3	.9	19	5.5	6	1.7
Unspecified	7	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	430	87.6	26	5.3	20	4.1	15	3.1

χ^2 (6, 491) = 61.37, p < .001, Cramer's V = .25.

The Types of Memes. There was a significant association between the memes' target and the type of memes, χ^2 (4, 491) = 112.9, p < .001, Cramer's V = .34. Memes targeting the Trump side were

predominantly grassroots action memes (190 memes, 55.4%), followed by persuasive memes (93 memes, 27.1%). On the other hand, memes targeting the Biden side were primarily public discussion memes (71 memes, 50.4%) and persuasive memes (63 memes, 44.7%).

Figure 3. Examples of the types of political memes.

Table 3
Crosstabulation regarding the association between the memes' target and the types of memes

	Persuasive memes		Grassroots action memes		Public discussion memes	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
The Biden side	63	44.7	7	5	71	50.4
The Trump side	93	27.1	190	55.4	60	17.5
Unspecified	1	14.3	3	42.9	3	42.9
Total	157	32	200	40.7	134	27.3

χ^2 (4, 491) = 112.9, p < .001, Cramer's V = .34.

Among the 141 memes targeting the Biden side, there was a significant association between the types of memes and the memes' sentiment, χ^2 (2, 141) = 22.42, p < .001. Memers within the network of Trump supporters on Twitter used persuasive memes and public discussion memes predominantly to depict a negative, unfavorable portrait of the Biden side. The sentiment of grassroots action memes targeting those individuals and entities was relatively balanced (42.9% positive and 57.1% negative).

Table 5
Crosstabulation regarding the association between the types of memes and the sentiment among the 141 memes targeting the Biden side

	Positive		Negative	
	N	%	N	%
Persuasive memes	2	3.2	61	96.8
Grassroots action memes	3	42.9	4	57.1
Public discussion memes	2	2.8	69	97.2
Total	7	5	134	95

χ^2 (2, 141) = 22.42, p < .001.

Among the 343 memes targeting The Trump side, there was a significant association between the types of memes and the memes' sentiment, χ^2 (4, 141) = 73.36, $p < .001$. The percentage of positive sentiment towards the Trump side was highest among grassroots action memes (182 memes, 95.8%), followed by persuasive memes (59 memes, 63.4%) and public discussion memes (36 memes, 60%). On the other hand, only 31 persuasive memes (33.3%) and 20 public discussion memes (33.3%) were framed negatively against Donald Trump and his side. The only grassroots action meme that portrayed Donald Trump negatively had an American flag in its content along with the text: "I'd rather be an American than a Trump supporter." While only a few memes (14 memes, or 4.1%) framed the Trump side neutrally, half of them were grassroots action memes.

Table 6

Crosstabulation regarding the association between the types of memes and the sentiment among the 343 memes targeting the Trump side

	Positive		Neutral		Negative	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Persuasive memes	59	63.4%	3	3.2%	31	33.3%
Grassroots action memes	182	95.8%	7	3.7%	1	.5%
Public discussion memes	36	60%	4	6.7%	20	33.3%
Total	277	80.8%	14	4.1%	52	15.2%

χ^2 (4, 141) = 73.36, $p < .001$

Findings supported H1 in positing that there is a significant difference in the portrayals of Donald Trump, Joe Biden, and their allies in internet memes during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Memers among the community of Trump supporters on Twitter during the 2020 U.S. presidential election primarily employed internet memes to express support for Donald Trump, his allies, Republican politicians, and conservatives. At the same time, they attempted to create an unfavorable portrayal of Joe Biden, his allies, Democratic politicians, and liberals.

DISCUSSION

The two-part project is, perhaps, one of the earliest in its field to probe into and provide insights on the community of Trump supporters and their communications during the 2020 U.S. presidential elections. Its second part, the current study, attempted to better understand Donald Trump, his community of supporters, and their political discourse and activities via internet memes under the theoretical framework of the framing theory. Findings indeed demonstrated how informants (i.e., memers among the #maga and #trump2020 network) purposively employed different strategies to package and relay information to others in the network, whether to express support for Donald Trump and his allies or to show disdain over Trump's opponents.

The Role of Internet Memes in Modern Political Discourse

The study investigated the participation of internet memes in political discourse, positioning the concept in the political context of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Findings were consistent with Moody-Ramirez and Church (2019), positing that the political party difference between the two presidential candidates contributed to variations in their representations in the political internet memes. However, while Donald Trump was primarily memed negatively during the 2016 U.S. presidential

election with his hairstyle and facial expressions being the targets, political memes criticizing him during the 2020 US presidential election focused on his failures, incapability, and improper acts and remarks during his presidential term. They also accused him of spreading hate, discrimination, and fake news, as well as being lawless and a liar.

The study supported Ross and Rivers (2017) in finding that the (de)legitimization strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis were employed in internet memes to not only help creators share their views and spread their messages in the attempt to influence others, but also to delegitimize the target of the memes as to bring about their desired political result. Donald Trump most benefited from grassroots action memes while Joe Biden was portrayed negatively in 95% of his memes, which is understandable since the study investigated the community of Trump supporters. Nonetheless, the #maga and #trump2020 community on Twitter during the 2020 U.S. presidential election did not comprise only Trump supporters, but also those who opposed him and those who supported his opponent, Joe Biden.

Chagas, Freire, Rios, and Magalhães (2019) posited that there were two ways politicians were laughed at (or being discussed) via internet memes, one of which happened when they mattered. It was the case for Donald Trump and Joe Biden during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, in which supporters and opposers engaged in communication battles to support their candidate, oppose his opponent, and perhaps secure the right to satirize both sides. Internet memes are subject to biased cognitive processing, particularly selective judgment or motivated skepticism; thus, political internet memes may be a vehicle for political messages that contribute to a polarized media environment despite their fleeting nature (Huntington, 2018). It should also be noted that many political memes analyzed in the study did not feature humor, an inherent characteristic of internet memes discussed in the literature review. Instead, they included rather serious messages or calls for action.

Political Memes and Civil Religion

While not discussed in the literature review, the content analysis highlighted civil religion as a major element in the content of the internet memes. Campbell, Arredondo, Dundas, and Wolf (2018) posited that internet memes evoked civil religion, an idea rooted in nationalist ideologies in which religion becomes a tool to interpret politics (Coleman, 1970; Rousseau, 2018). The civil religion discourse in memes was done via God Talk (i.e., religious worldviews are used to interpret and justify specific political actions, and vice versa). Such discourse was predominantly spoken in the voice of Conservative American Christians and from a viewpoint often closely associated with a Republican agenda. Such findings were consistent with this study; some memes depicted Donald Trump as God-sent, argued that what he (and his Republican allies) was doing was per Christian beliefs or God's teachings, and voting for Donald Trump was sometimes portrayed as a religious decision.

Duerringer (2016) argued that incorporating evangelical Christianity with mainline Republican was politically problematic and inherently unstable. Still, embedding evangelical Christianity to traditional conservatism, as well as strands of libertarianism, neoliberalism, and neoconservatism, was a Republican strategy to continue to appeal to the mass of people and drive voters to the poll. While it may be the case, McLoughlin and Southern (2020) suggested that the level of policy information in political memes was low, which means consumers would be unlikely to increase their political knowledge from digesting memes. Nevertheless, there was not enough evidence to determine if

incidental exposure to political content in internet memes had any impact on meme consumers' perspective and attitude, or they simply laughed at the content then resumed scrolling.

Conclusion

The weaponization of political internet memes during the 2020 U.S. presidential election to sway public opinion was evident, supporting Zannettou et al. (2018) argument. Such strategies to exploit the expressive power of politically and ideologically imbued internet memes were also employed by various entities in previous elections, namely the 2012 and 2016 ones (Foster, 2014; Zannettou et al., 2018). As a communication medium, internet memes have several advantages compared to other forms of mass communication media. They are funnier, more concise, easier to understand, more relatable, and more vivid. The study thus agrees with Miltner (2018) in positing that the nature of memes indeed makes them an ideal venue for political critique and commentary. It also supports Dean (2019) in suggesting that communication and political scholars perceive the production and exchange of digital visual media, notably internet memes, not as frivolous activity on the margins of politics but as increasingly central to everyday practices of politically engaged citizens. Finally, the study argues that it is now inappropriate to treat internet memes merely as regular laughing stocks, but instead an integral agent of daily societal life, a fundamental communication medium, and a serious research subject of social science.

Limitations and Future Research

The study recognized several of its limitations and, at the same time, proposed viable approaches for future research concerning internet memes and political communication. While the study probed into the Twitter community and their communication during the 2020 US presidential election, it only investigated the social network of Trump supporters rather than the networks surrounding both candidates. Thus, future research can examine the community of Biden supporters using hashtags equivalent to #maga and #trump2020. Comparative assessment of the two communities of supporters can then be provided, from which contrasts in their actions, behaviors, sentiment, and civility are highlighted. The social networks of political supporters, political content, and political internet memes on legacy media, as well as other social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Reddit, Parler, or 4chan), should also be considered.

Additionally, since the study referred solely to Twitter data, users' demographics could not be identified and analyzed. Hence, the media effects, particularly of political internet memes, could not be determined via content analysis. Therefore, other research methods, such as interviews or surveys, should be further applied to complement the findings of this study. There were also hiccups in determining the status of memes of some units of analysis (e.g., selfies and family pictures) similar to Chagas, Freire, Rios, and Magalhães (2019). Thus, a proper and consensus conceptualization of memes, especially political memes, needs to be developed.

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APPENDIX A: CODEBOOK

Adapting the codebooks from Foster (2014) and Chagas, Freire, Rios, and Magalhães (2019) for analyzing contents of political internet memes disseminated during presidential elections (with adjustments to fit the study's purposes), the following variables are coded:

A. Offensive Words

Whether the meme contained offensive words following Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) definition and categorization or not (0 = no, 1 = yes). Offensive words might include:

1 – Seven dirty words, following the Federal Communications Commission guidelines for the seven words that cannot be used on television, which are shit, piss, cunt, fuck, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits.

2 – Sexual words, or words based on sexual body parts and sexual acts, such as penis, balls, vagina, or jerking off.

3 – Excretory words, or words related to excrement or excretory body parts, such as poop, ass, or asshole.

4 – Other strong or mildly offensive words that do not fit into the above categories, such as bitch, bullshit, damn, or hell, or disputed words.

B. Target

The primary individual(s) or organization(s) portrayed in the memes. They could be:

1 – Joe Biden, his allies, Democratic politicians, or liberals.

2 – Donald Trump, his allies, Republican politicians, or conservatives.

3 – there was no clear target, or both (1) and (2) were equally portrayed in the meme.

C. Portrayal

How the target was primarily portrayed in the memes to represent the central theme or idea. The portrayal can either be:

1 – The politician, or the ideal candidate. The target fulfilled the ideal picture of a traditional leader by posing with other leaders, looking serious, or having empathy and compassion. The target should either look like state-people or express compassion towards their followers (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Indicators of the ideal candidate theme may include, but are not limited to:

- An elected official, including other people of power or elected officials.
- Patriotic symbols, such as flags, monuments, and military machinery.
- Symbols of progress, such as economic growth or technology.
- Identifiable entourage, including security personnel, reporters, and aids.
- Campaign paraphernalia, such as visible symbols, logos, or names on posters and other campaigning materials.
- Political hoopla, such as confetti, balloons, and streamers.
- Religious symbols, such as places of worship, religious figures, or other religious symbols such as crosses or pulpits.
- Formal attire, such as a tuxedo, a black-tie, or a conventional business suit.
- Personal interaction, both physical interactions or affinity gestures, such as waving, hugging, embracing, kissing, or shaking hands, with supporters. These interactions should be personal, i.e., one-on-one.

- Family associations, including the appearance of family members or personal connections to historical family ties.

2 – The populist. The target appeared as one of the people, often be seen in semi-professional or casual clothes, and did ordinary things (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Indicators of the populist theme may include, but are not limited to:

- Celebrities, such as actors, musicians, television or online personalities, influencers, and athletes.
- Audiences, in which supporters tightly pack into a limited space, or a mass of supporters that can be seen applauding, waving, cheering, and wearing campaign paraphernalia.
- Crowd interaction, such as rapid, anonymous handshakes and touches to groups of supporters without an indicator of personal interaction.
- Informal attire, including semi-profession clothing (e.g., rolled-up shirtsleeves, or a suit without a jacket) and casual dress (e.g., khaki pants, slacks, or jeans; shirt, sport coats, jean jackets, sweaters or other causal garments).
- Ordinary people, including common folks, members of disadvantaged communities, or workers in manufacturing plants.
- Physical activities, including common athletic or recreational activities, or other physical or social work such as serving meals or chopping wood.

3 – The loser, or the incapable. The target was described as ridiculous, incapable, often in an undesired or unexpected situation, or showing unapproving facial expressions (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Indicators of the loser theme may include, but not limited to:

- Disapproving audiences, in which attendants can be seen booing, jeering, making hostile hand gestures (e.g., flipping the bird, or giving a thumbs-down), falling asleep, or showing any signs of bore or disinterest. The crowds' size is usually small, with only a few supporters scattered around and empty chairs are visible.
- Weaknesses, include falling, tripping, a lack of coordination, or an illness.
- Defiant gestures, such as punching the air, pounding the podium, pumping fists, pointing fingers, or wringing hands.
- Inappropriate non-verbal displays, including facial expressions, gestures, or moods that are incongruent with the context of the meme.
- Political failures, scandals, or the inability to "keep promises".

4 – The menace, or the criminal. The target was described as evil, cunning, villainous, or having criminal schemes that intentionally caused devastating consequences to the country and its people, either politically, socially, or economically. Indicators of the menace theme may include, but not limited to:

- Accusations of criminal intents or actions.
- Affiliations with crime organizations, syndicates, or families.
- Prisons and related symbols, images, or paraphernalia such as handcuffs, chains, electric chairs, or prison bars.
- Symbols, images, or paraphernalia related to the devil, such as having horns or fangs, holding the devil trident, or exercising antichrist activities.

- Improper, immoral, or illegal sexual activities such as sexual harassment, paedophilia, or incest.

5 – Other. The portrayal could not be categorized in any of the above themes.

D. Extremist Affiliation

Whether the target was portrayed along with, or attached to, symbols or implications of extremist affiliations. Extremist affiliations may include:

0 – No extremist affiliation was found.

1 – Left-wing extremist affiliations. The target portrayal was attached with symbols, images, or paraphernalia that are usually connected to extreme left-wing ideologies and activities. They can be, for example, communism, socialism, anarchism, the symbol of hammer and sickle, or the Soviet Union.

2 – Right-wing extremist affiliations. The target portrayal is attached with symbols, images, or paraphernalia that are usually connected to extreme right-wing ideologies and activities. They can be, for example, fascism, Nazism and neo-Nazism, nationalism, white supremacism, the Swastika, the Confederate flag, or the QAnon symbol.

3 – Other extremist affiliations. The target portrayal is attached with symbols, images, or paraphernalia that are usually connected to other extremist individuals, organizations, or movements such as terrorist organizations, proto-states, or other foreign-influenced affiliations.

E. Type of Political Memes

Chagas, Freire, Rios, and Magalhães (2019) identified three types of political memes:

1 – Persuasive memes, which may include in their content:

- Propositional rhetoric or pragmatic appeal: The content suggested or referred to a candidate's proposals, raised a discussion that points out voters' rational calculus, or touched on matters related to themes discussed in the election and the candidates' opinions.
- Seducing or threatening rhetoric or emotional appeal: The content used explicitly subjective and emotional aspects, such as portraying a candidate as a "protector, or father, of the poor," placing him among children, or even appealing to emotions like fear or hope.
- Ethical and moral rhetoric or ideological appeal: The content examined scandals, criticized corruption or inadequate public resources management, and mentioned rivalries between different political factions.
- Critical rhetoric or appeal to the credibility of the source: The content was anchored in sources such as statements by third parties, the media, opinion surveys, or others to ensure the greater credibility of a given candidate or the content itself.

2 – Grassroots action memes, which may include in their content:

- Dynamics of collective action and networks curated by organizations: The content was explicitly sponsored by party organizations (and not by supporters), companies, NGOs, professional categories, or specific syndicate entities. In this classification, memes created by campaign strategists were included.
- Dynamics of hybrid connective action and networks catalyzed by organizations: The content was the result of supportive action without connections to party organizations or

other entities. In this classification, content created by supporters or for supporters to show their preferences were included.

- Dynamics of connective action and self-organized networks: The content was created by an informal group, such as the Occupy movement. Such content was spontaneously generated with some level of political engagement.
- Dynamics of casual connective action: The content resulted from a trend or behavior not necessarily related to a particular political engagement, such as photo fads or selfies. In this codification, TV photos during the electoral debate were included.

3 – Public discussion memes, which may include in their content:

- Literary or cultural allusions: The content mentioned cultural products (e.g., series or movies) or popular culture in general, including references to popular expressions, internet slang, famous characters, or celebrities.
- Jokes about political characters: The content presented comments about specific characters on the political scene.
- Situational jokes: The content presented comments about candidates' facial, gesture, or body reactions in certain situations.

F. Sentiment

Whether the general sentiment towards the target(s) of the memes was 1 – positive, 2 – neutral, or 3 – negative.