Memes and Politics: An Analysis of the Digital Memetic Rhetoric Employed During the 2016 Presidential Election

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Introduction

Throughout history, memes have been employed on a multitude of platforms to advance a plethora of ideals. From satirical commentaries on sociological phenomena to humorous analogies between cats and dogs, memes have a long history of demonstrating rhetorical value in American society - this practice does not fall short of political memes. However, regardless of how widely accepted memes have become in The Digital Age, the various forms of rhetoric commonly utilized in them have become quite controversial – especially regarding political memes, which carry a greater social significance, and are regarded as having a certain responsibility to portray accurate information through modes of rhetoric that do not utilize ethical, logical, factual, or contextual inconsistencies. It is in this way that political memes can be considered one of the greatest modes of rhetorical discourse through which political entities can advance their agendas.

Thesis

Through a rhetorical analysis of political memes utilized during the 2016 Presidential Election, I contend that conservative memes masterfully deployed logical fallacies to incite rage-fueled calls to action, whereas liberal memes struggled to compete by striving for logical consistency; and thus, did not achieve the same level of impact as conservative memes. I will also evidence the trends surrounding the use of such fallacies in meme culture and how they are indicative of deeper underlying issues in American society; specifically in terms of the relationships between modern politics and public opinion.

Literature Review

What is a meme? Richard Dawkins first coined the term “meme” in 1976. He compared it to genetic modes of communication in his novel, The Selfish Gene:

“Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passed it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his
lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain” (Dawkins 193).

And thus, the origins of the “meme” were solidified in the literary community. A “meme” is essentially an element of a culture that is passed from one individual to another or from one entity to another by non-genetic means – often done so through imitation. Dawkins goes on in is book to explain how he decided to title the notion of a meme:

“We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. ’Mimeme' (note: ‘something that is imitated) comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ’gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ’memory', or to the French word même. It should be pronounced to rhyme with ’cream.” (Dawkins 191).

Limor Shifman, Department of Communication and Journalism, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, redefined memes in The Digital Age and analyzed the role of memetics in the modern world in his essay, “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker.”

He wrote,

“While widely disputed in academia, the meme concept has enthusiastically been picked up by Internet users. A search of Google Trends suggests a spurt of interest on the subject since data collection began in 2008, and a quick Google query of the term ‘Internet meme’ yielded around 1,550,000 hits (January 4, 2012), many of them leading to large interactive depositories of memetic content” (Shifman 364).

Though cultural and academic perceptions about memetic rhetoric today vary, it is an irrefutable fact that digital memes are very prevalent rhetorical devices in modern society.

Natalie Fenton, in her graduate research paper, “We Want You: A Rhetorical Analysis of Propaganda from Government Posters to Political Memes” provided a background into the origins of political memes as they have been commissioned and utilized by United States government officials over the last century. She wrote that, “Propaganda artists (also) relied heavily on logical fallacies when developing persuasive works of art” (47).

In her paper, she explains that a logical fallacy is a “deductively invalid or erroneous argument with the appearance of validity or a demonstrably false conclusion from plausible reasoning” (Floridi 318, Fenton 12). She then cites examples of fallacies that were employed in the effort to gain support during World War II – including the use of “slippery slope,” “ad hominem,” and “black-and-white thinking” in defense of political
ideologies. Her argument was essentially that these fallacies were more effective in igniting a reaction from their audience – as tends to be the way with campaigns that exist outside the realm of truth.

This rhetorical method is evidenced countless times in her essay primarily regarding American rhetoric behind mass communications during WWII, but it predates even then. Fenton goes on to give a brief overview of propagandist strategies recorded throughout the history of mankind. She wrote, “Over 4,000 years ago, rulers were concerned about their public image and how to prevent uprisings by keeping a positive image with the citizens. While a term for propaganda was not coined, various persuasive techniques that would now fall under that category were being utilized by ruling parties” (Fenton 15). Her essay delves briefly into the use of dishonest or manipulative rhetorical tactics in propaganda (now almost entirely employed through mass media and digital platforms) dating back to Ancient Greece, Ancient Egypt, and Ancient Mesopotamia. Though the mediums through which influential entities employ such rhetoric are consistently subject to change, the systematic use of unethical, impractical, illogical, and inadequate information is evidently ever-present today; in fact, one would argue that it is even more prevalent in our society in this - The Digital Age.

To celebrate the 25th birthday of the World Wide Web, Researchers Susanna Fox and Lee Rainie of the Pew Research Center in Washington D.C. conducted a research study analyzing the modern cultural presence of the internet in the United States – the goal of this study was to evaluate how dependent our society is on digitalized access to information and media through this mode by analyzing how often, in what ways, and to what extent people around the country use the internet.

They found that 87% of Americans regularly use the internet – among those surveyed, the majority felt that the internet had a positive influence on their life; however, the findings over whether or not the participants perceived the internet to be a positive or negative influence on society in general were more obscure. The findings indicated that while participants felt the internet positively influenced their individual lives, it is debatable that it has such an impact on society as a whole (Fox & Rainie 2014).

Rainie later related these findings to an earlier publication of hers – a research study entitled “Social Media and Political Engagement” in which she states,

“Overall, there are mixed partisan and ideological patterns among social media users when it comes to using social media like social networking sites and Twitter. The social
media users who talk about politics on a regular basis are the most likely to use social media for civic or political purposes. And the social media users who have firmer party and ideological ties—liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans—are, at times, more likely than moderates in both parties to use social media for these purposes” (Rainie 2012, 2).

In evaluating the relationship between social engagement in politics in The Digital Age and the use of the internet to spread political ideologies, Rainie found that cultural perceptions regarding the use of digital media and its effects on public opinion (over political matters specifically) tended to be negative – yet the majority of those surveyed had employed the use of the internet to share aspects of their political ideologies themselves. So, while the majority of Americans feel that the information shared on the digital media platforms regarding political events, ideologies, figures, and general data tended to be incorrect, false, inadequate, or simply has a negative effect on public opinion/awareness of American politics, they all participated in sharing such posts on social media themselves.

Brian McClure of the University of Georgia evaluated the Rainie study in his graduate paper, “Discovering the Discourse of Internet Political Memes.” In his paper, he debates the use and validity of satirical political memes in digital media today. Citing American cartoonist Scott McCloud’s theory that political cartoons are merely “‘amplification by simplification,’ a process through which ideas are made accessible to a wider audience, by ‘focusing on specific details’ and by ‘stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’” (McClure 292, McCloud 30). He argues that due to the concise and succinct rhetoric often employed in “successful” political memes, the information that is presented is often presented through a very narrow lens. While some would refer to this as simply a form of “party-biased” rhetoric rooted in truth, McClure argues that the majority of political memes’ argumentative strategies are so dependent on information that is portrayed in language delivered from very particular angle and through a format that is constricted in its coverage of data, that they cannot be trusted as adequate portrayals of truth and reality.

He found that the data Rainie presented suggested “the number of adults who are capable of and who deliberately engage with political material is increasing, with percentages relatively balanced between users identified as liberal Democrat and conservative Republican. Those who “follow” politically-oriented sites tend to be actively engaged with the material produced or distributed by those sites; that is, users who are engaged
with politically-active sites demonstrate their support by “liking” or sharing posts, or by commenting on them” (McClure 292). These findings were evidently reflected the findings in my personal research, as well. Through the research compiled between Rainie, McClure, and my own observations throughout this project; it does appear that there are significant trends evidencing that the majority of Americans who hold adamant beliefs regarding matters of the political nature tend to express them on social media. This typically involves “liking,” “favoriting,” “sharing,” and “reposting” digital rhetorical devices and pages that support their ideals – including memes.

Ashley Daines (Department of Cognitive Science at Case Western Reserve University) argued in her original research graduate thesis that memes can be considered as a form of “snowclone.” The term “snowclone” represents a “type of cliché phrasal template originally defined as a multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants by lazy journalists and writers,” according to Geoffrey Pullum, Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh (Pullum 2003).

Daines’ central argument is that the meme form is often employed in a way that cheats the observer of an entire truth. In her paper, “Keep Calm and Study Memes,” she contends that when one takes into account the social and political impact of memes in The Digital Age, it becomes abundantly clear that they, more often than not, do not provide enough accurate information to incite the reaction they usually do. Her study focused on the “Keep Calm and Carry On” meme that originated prior to World War II – it was originated and perpetuated by the British Government in order to ease tensions surrounding cultural perceptions of potential intercontinental crises.

She discussed the ways in which this meme has been duplicated and adopted to new messages and cultural themes in The Digital Age, and delegates the evolution from the seriousness of the circumstances surrounding its original creation to the lighthearted nature in which it is often perpetuated today to the ignorance of the masses. Her primary concerns are illustrated through a contextual analysis of 100 of these imitated “Keep Calm and…” memes. She goes on in her paper to discuss how her analysis indicates the potential issues surrounding the increasingly rapid ways in which memes are digitally adopted, appropriated, and shared today –
often causing a general loss of awareness over the context in which the meme originated. She argues that this “snowclone” meme model can have serious cultural repercussions in terms of societal awareness of systematically manipulative governmental and political public relations as employed through mass media.

Emma Axelrod, author for the Brown Political Review, wrote in her 2016 article *The Role of Memes in Politics*, “the prevalence of memes in the 2016 electoral discourse is part of the larger trend of discussing of politics as a form of entertainment, which can be a double-edged sword. When folks are driven to talk about politics based on its entertainment value, whether it be discussing the debates as though recapping a sports game (placing emphasis on “offensive” and “defensive” strikes and dramatic moments rather than the intricacies of policy differences) or passing along a funny political gif, they often develop opinions based on a vague “like” or “dislike” of a candidate rather than based on comprehension of their platforms.” She criticizes political memes as devices of absolute content due to the simplicity of their content, inaccuracy of their data, and their implementation and use as sources of information and critique regarding more complex matters that inevitably lead to unhealthy modes of communication regarding politics.

Axelrod’s points can be evidenced by contrasting the nature of evaluating politicians’ capacity to fulfill their duties before and after the evolution of digital political memes. Charteris Black wrote about the evolution of assessing political candidates’ credibility and capacity to lead in his essay, “*Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor.*” He describes the process as a form of critical character evaluation; “Voters make decisions based on their judgments of the honesty, morality, and integrity of politicians. These views arise form considerations such as consistency of actions with words and the efficacy of political arguments. However, they are also influenced by impressions arising from a politician’s style and self-presentation.” These are the very points that Axelrod seeks to address in her article – that the evolution of politicians’ working to represent their individual representation of character, integrity, belief system, decision making, and capacity has become somewhat moot with the rising presence of digital political criticism rhetoric; particularly in the case of memes. She cites Donald Trump’s public relations decisions regarding the representation of personality in the public eye during the election year in terms of the conservative memes promoting his campaign. She then goes on to discuss memes particularly geared towards promoting certain political brands, parties, platforms, or
candidates; writing, “the meme does introduce or reinforce the candidate’s prevailing cultural image and might subconsciously influence those who traffic in this brand of internet satire. Memes have the potential to be powerful in an era where likeability can be a deciding factor in elections.” Her essential point is that regardless of the content or accuracy of messages portrayed in political memes, they can assuage audiences in ways that would not normally be reflected in other modes of communication due to the fact that they stem from agreeability – that the fact that they are memes indicates they could be considered as representative of mass perceptions and public opinion, and therefore, truth.

The general consensus between these scholars seems to be that one must exhibit great caution, skepticism, and an acute sense of practicality when employing political memes – especially in an age where we have the ability to converse and engage with anyone anywhere in the world at the touch of a button in mere seconds. This rapid spread of information through digital media can lead to proper “fact-checking” being put on “the back burner.” So it in in this way that we must be vigilant in employing these modes of rhetorical discourse whilst discussing socially and culturally significant matters.

Additionally, there seems to be a general consensus that political memes are often sources of unnecessary conflict, tension, or destructive and unsound public attitudes towards existing matters in American politics – this often clouds individual judgment and allows for greater, more valid issues to go unaddressed in the public eye.

Research

Methods:
For the purposes of this paper, I decided to perform content analysis on a multitude of the most popular political memes posted during the 2016 Presidential Election. More specifically, I studied memes meant to advance either the conservative or liberal agenda between November 8th, 2015 and November 8th, 2016. My research was qualitative in nature.

I made accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – the three most popular social media platforms in America – and delved into locating and documenting relevant political memes posted within this time frame. I began by following 30 popular party-adjacent or party-affiliated accounts on each platform that regularly posted
political memes. I then began documenting all of the relevant memes posted on these accounts in the previously stated time period.

I had saved almost 500 memes before I began narrowing down the criteria for selection. In order to determine which memes should be included in the evaluation – which memes were the most “successful” – I first had to determine what qualified as “successful” within the parameters of the context. The ultimate goal here was to figure out what framework would need to be applied in order to discern the most popular memes; the memes most deserving to be included in the study.

It was during this period that I began to realize that the most-shared conservative memes tended to be shared more often than the most-shared liberal memes. After evaluating the virality and popularity of the content I’d collected, I decided that I would select 50 of the most thematically relevant and “successful” liberal memes and 50 of the most thematically relevant and “successful” conservative memes to include in my overall analysis. “Success,” in this context, is measured the number of shares, likes, favorites, and re-posts that the original meme acquired between when it was posted and when I conducted my preliminary research – for the purposes of this paper, going forward these four phenomenons will be referred to collectively as “reinforcement” or “reinforced.”

The qualifications for the conservative memes selected were (1) they had to be posted between the given dates, (2) they had to obviously advance/support the American Conservative agenda, and (3) they had to be reinforced by a minimum of 10,000 times between the three given social media platforms. The qualifications for the liberal memes selected were (1) they had to be posted between the given dates, (2) they had to obviously advance/support the American Liberal agenda, and (3) they had to be shared a minimum of 3,000 times between the three given social media platforms.

I then performed a preliminary content analysis in search of themes in contextualized content, popularity/virality/”success,” sentiments, logical fallacies, rhetorical techniques, and modes of linguistic communication. Taking into account my thesis, I also mindfully examined the relationships and possible connections between the rhetorical content and the amount of success attributed to each meme. I looked for
themes specifically relating to possible or obvious shortcomings in logic – as previously mentioned, I was looking for failings indicatively geared towards ethical, logical, factual, or contextual matters.

Results/Discussion

General Findings:

As previously stated, I found that the most-reinforced conservative memes tended to be reinforced significantly more often than the most-reinforced liberal memes. Liberal accounts tended to have dramatically fewer “followers,” – in the cases of competing accounts (i.e. “Young Conservatives vs. Young Liberals) the follower rate for the liberal accounts tended to have between 1/10th and 1/50th the number of followers. Additionally, conservative accounts were more likely to show up in search results – and tended to be closer to the top of the search suggestions list during the typing of the actual search request. This was the case on all three studied platforms. Additionally, 100% of the conservative memes studied in the content analysis utilized images, whereas only approximately 60% of the liberal memes included digital photos/illustrations in their rhetorical endeavors. The other roughly 40% employed solely text-based memes. A common colloquial saying in America is, “a picture is worth a thousand words” – perhaps this sentiment is somewhat reflected in my findings.

Conservative Memes:

Conservative memes that employed illogical/unsound rhetoric tended to incite the greatest reaction in the form of responsive posts/written comments made on digital platforms. Additionally, the success rates at which the conservative memes analyzed were reinforced despite the illogical/unsound rhetoric employed indicated greater sociological failings of the general public to “fact-check” and critically evaluate satirical political rhetoric often employed in digital memes.

Conservative memes that employed illogical/incorrect/unethical rhetoric and rhetoric that could therefore be easily contended/disproven tended to adhere to five thematic strategies (titled as follows): (1) Allusions to Hypocrisy, (2) Circular Logic, (3) Comparing Shallow Qualities, (4) Comparing Seemingly Prioritized Events, (3) Blatantly False Accusations/Data.
One of the most common thematic strategies employed in the conservative memes studied was allusion to hypocrisy; executed by comparing two different ideals without contextualizing the references. 11 of the 50 conservative memes studied followed this format. These memes tended to provide images accompanied by somewhat explanatory text comparing allusions to two different existing liberal ideologies. Very often, these allusions depicted certain qualities of the ideologies through a specific lens – portraying them in a negative light. 100% of the memes studied that followed this model depicted the ideologies with minimal, inaccurate, or falsely sourced language – and were therefore misleading about the origins, thought process, execution, motivations, objectives, purpose, or core values associated with the ideologies. Additionally, following the raised concerns expressed in the Literature Review about concise rhetoric employed in memes, they all failed to provide sociological context or accurate background information for the material provided. These memes also tended to subscribe to the logical fallacy commonly known as the “Straw Man Fallacy.” According to Purdue Owl, the Straw Man Fallacy “oversimplifies an opponent's viewpoint and then attacks that hollow argument… In reality, however, the opposition probably has more complex and sympathetic arguments to support their point. By not addressing those arguments, the author is not treating the opposition with respect or refuting their position” (Purdue 2013). I would argue that in the case of these political memes, the “author” refers to the creator of the meme, and to some extent, those who “reinforce” it – and the “opposition” refers to the liberal stance on the ideologies referred to in the meme. The memes tended to oversimplify the issues surrounding the ideology in question – and incited adverse reactions from audiences over these skewed depictions.

Example:
(2) Seven of the memes studied employed circular logic – which is an argument that “restates the argument rather than actually proving it” (Purdue 2013). These fallacies were not hard to discern as their obvious rhetorical strategies were usually employed in a satirical fashion. The majority of the comments/captions implied that the participants involved reinforced the meme in a somewhat facetious nature. However, the commentary was not specific enough to indicate that they didn’t actually support the sentiments expressed in the memes in question.

Example:

![Meme Example]

Doesn't add up!

(3) Another exceptionally common stylistic practice I noticed was the recurring theme of comparing shallow, irrelevant, or meaningless (within the context of the meme) qualities between two irrelevant scenarios in order to discredit the capacity/competence of the person or party involved. This and the allusions to hypocrisy were the most commonly occurring themes in the study (between the conservative memes analyzed). This strategy would compare two scenarios by drawing connections between seemingly relevant aspects – and portray them in a light that discredits one or both of the scenarios. However, while these memes occasionally provided a location, date, or event in which the scenario took place; they did not provide the given conversational or situational context from which the quote, scene, or image was pulled. This strategy oversimplified the examples provided within the rhetorical narrative in order to frame them in a way that suits
the purposes of the conservative party. Therefore, these situations were also forms of “Straw Man” fallacies. These memes accounted for 15 of the 50 memes analyzed.

Example:

*Note: The first photo was taken at the 2008 DNC – the quote was in reference to the election of Barrack Obama. The second photo was taken at the 2016 DNC – the quote pictured was never actually said – but it is a reference to a sentiment Obama expressed in an earlier interview with Oprah regarding positive public opinion over Donald Trump’s campaign. The meme here compares the two sentiments as if they were both a commentary on her husband’s administration.

(4) Of the fifty memes analyzed, 13 employed the strategic format of displaying two images – each taken from different events/incidents – and providing a short and heavily tailored description of what is happening in each of the pictures provided.

Typically, one of the depicted events is portrayed in a way that indicates it is supposed to be considered more respectable or noteworthy than the other. All of the provided written descriptions of the events, much like with the allusions to hypocrisy and the comparison of shallow qualities theories, failed to include contextual background information on the event itself – some indicated the location and title of the event at which the photo was taken – however, the majority of these descriptions explained the only very moment shown in the given image. Of the 13 memes analyzed, 10 of the written descriptive image captions described solely what was happening in the very moment in which the image was taken – of those twelve, eleven inaccurately described the events taking place in the photo.
The purposes of these memes were to exemplify that either the liberal party, or a single liberal political figure, has poorly organized priorities. About 75% of these memes contained inclusive “overall” captions relaying the reasoning behind comparing the two specified events/incidents and further explaining the conservative ideals perpetuated within the meme.

Very often, these memes exhibited the “Moral Equivalence Fallacy” – a fallacy that compares “minor misdeeds with major atrocities” (Purdue 2013). In all examples of this fallacy provided, the “minor misdeed” was portrayed as the less-respectable or less-noteworthy event, whereas the “major atrocity” was portrayed as the more-respectable or more-noteworthy event. Additionally, in the case of the memes’ use of this fallacy – often the “major atrocity” was portrayed from the angle of a positive or revered outlook on the incident referenced. More specifically, they portrayed rhetoric involving “heroes” who stopped, fought against (in one way or another), or prevented major atrocities. Additionally, the “minor misdeed” is not always necessarily a misdeed in that it was an unethical event as it happened in society; but rather, through the lens of the conservative agenda, it could be considered unethical to have been prioritized “over the other option” (which is how these memes portray the given events; as if one was “chosen” over the other).

Example:

(5) To some extent, every single conservative meme studied contained inaccurate data - either through the narrow lens of blatant political bias that led to incorrect contextual implications of the meme, unethical
strategies in sourcing, or erroneous logistical fallacies. After researching the cultural background, events referenced, and contextual implications of each meme, it became clear that the memes studied tended to be untrustworthy in content (as indicated by the preliminary research in the Literature Review). However, there were several memes whose “success” was dependent solely on false data. These memes were centered on anti-liberal rhetoric almost exclusively employed through blatantly false statements/accusations/data. In compiling trends studied in the comments/responsive comments/captioned “re-shares” and general public opinion regarding such posts; this meme-form, of the five acknowledged, seemed to be the most easily-contended. It is for this reason, I believe, that it was the least-shared format of the five analyzed – having only accounted for four of the 50 memes. However, looking at this number as a possible statistic representative of 2/25th of all of the most popular conservative memes reinforced during the 2016 election, that’s still quite an alarming ratio.

Example:

*Note: The parties switched platforms in the 20th century – yet this meme claims the same party ideology produced the depicted mindsets.

Liberal Memes:

The liberal memes analyzed could not be segmented into the same patterns of rhetorical strategies as was the case with the conservative memes analyzed, as only 3 of the 50 liberal memes analyzed exhibited any of the five identified rhetorical fallacies utilized by their conservative counterparts. In fact, the majority of the most-recurring trends present in the content analysis of the most successful liberal memes were trends regarding
success rates, mimetic modes of discourse, and themes in the practical and logistical employment of anti-conservative and pro-liberal rhetoric.

At the conclusion of my content analysis, I found that liberal memes that were mimicked, imitated, or adopted to new themes/messages tended to show a brief spike in reinforcements – particularly through “shares,” “likes,” and “favorites;” they would then lose popularity indefinitely. These “adopted” memes were one of the most commonly used rhetorical strategies employed in liberal memes during the election period. The practice of adopting existing memes to different ideals, sentiments, and messages was less common among conservative memes. Overall, based on my findings it appears to be an unsuccessful mimetic strategy in the long run.

Example:

The liberal memes that employed specific pro-liberal rhetoric tended to employ images of either a liberal political figure or of a direct quote from a liberal political figure whose ideals expressed in the quote were supposed to be perceived as positive, uplifting, honorable, inspiring, or relatable. Much like with the recurring issue in many of the conservative posts, these memes usually did not provide situational context for the quote/scene portrayed. However, they provided enough information in the quote – which were always transcribed accurately – to give the audience a clear idea of what the speaker in question was talking about. These posts usually included the location or event at which the quote/photo was taken – which allowed for easy fact-checking and background research into the reference. About half of the time, these posts were accompanied by supporting commentary in the form of an inclusive caption praising the figure/ideal in question for their stance on the issue/topic in question.
The liberal memes that employed anti-conservative rhetoric tended to employ direct quotes from political leaders (both conservative and liberal), or from written legislation accompanied by the source from which it came. Typically, if the quote/image included a conservative political figure or legislation advanced by a conservative political figure, the quote was portrayed in a negative light as an unethical stance/sentiment. None of the memes adhering to this format were satirical. Additionally, they were usually accompanied by captions advancing and further explaining the liberal sentiment perpetuated within the meme.

Example:

If the anti-conservative meme utilized a quote/image including a liberal political leader, it tended to be images of him/her stating his/her own opinion about another conservative leader, viewpoint, legislative agenda, or belief that he/she considers unethical from the liberal point of view – relating those points to issues in
modern society. Very often, these points were followed by calls to action or suggestions for solutions regarding the topic in question. None of the memes adhering to this format were satirical.

Example:

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“We are not going to allow Donald Trump and other demagogues to divide us up. We will stand together.”

Bernie Sanders
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Another form these memes take often came in the form of screenshots of Tumblr posts typically including the top-liked comments from the original post. These comments were later added to the meme because they advanced the points in the original post/agenda of the party the meme is in favor of. They tended to include an element of passage of time – or imply a continuing cultural understanding between when the original post was published, and after the supporting commentary was added to it – thus indicating continuing cultural relevance. These memes were always, on some level, humorous in nature. And very often fell in line with the tendency in the liberal memes analyzed to detract attention from more serious issues stemming from opposing party beliefs and behavior to facetious jests and anecdotes about irrelevant, lighthearted topics.

Example:
Additionally, half of the most-shared liberal memes that employed negative rhetoric against a particular candidate (10 out of 50) often employed critiques of shallow/aesthetic qualities (meaning of qualities that would not impact the politicians performance as a professional). All of these memes employed “light-hearted” rhetoric. The difference between this and the third rhetorical fallacy outlaid in the conservative meme content analysis is that these memes were not actually rhetorical arguments about the candidate’s capacity to lead, but rather lighthearted jokes made facetiously en suit of matters not pertaining to the candidate’s character, integrity, experience, priorities, or ability to fulfill the duties required from a political leader. Though these are technically liberal memes in that they are jokes made at the expense of conservative politicians; they do not contain logistical fallacies or rhetoric espousing the liberal agenda; but rather, they are solely used as a form of entertainment.
Examples:

Example 1: The “Tiny Trump” Joke – facetious references to childish mannerisms in Trump’s physical presentation

Example 2: The “Small Hands” Joke – facetious reference to theories of Trump’s possibly fragile masculinity

Relatively few of the conservative memes studied employed this rhetoric – and the ones that did usually related the alluded to qualities to questions of character/capacity of the candidate involved. Example: the idea that Hillary Clinton’s “inability to please a man” being the cause of her husbands’ affairs was related to her “inability to please a country.” 100% of these examples also exhibited logical and ethical inconsistencies, but they were so scarce among the 100 memes evaluated that they were not substantial enough to include in the list of recurring overall themes. Additionally, it is worth noting that many more of these examples were found in the original list of 500 memes – however, after implementing the criteria for inclusion in the study, they were not “successful” enough to “make the cut.”
In the case of liberal memes, since the pool from which I could choose memes to analyze was much more shallow than that of conservative memes, these rhetorical strategies were much more common throughout the content analysis. It is in this way that the majority of the liberal memes analyzed were much more lighthearted than those of the conservative nature. This was very surprising to me, a liberal, in that much of the criticism the conservative candidates received during the election regarded very serious topics.

Conclusions

While many would argue that there is just as much, if not more, content worth criticism imposed by the conservative candidates/party during the 2016 election; memes advancing these notions were simply not nearly as effective as those advancing the conservative agenda during that time frame.

Thusly, this phenomenon sparks a lot of questions over why and how liberal memes were so unsubstantial when contrasted to the conservative party’s successes in the realm of political memes – even when the majority of political commentators and critics argue that there was much to discuss and address on behalf of both parties’ agendas during the campaign. The findings of this study indicate that contributing factors may be (1) the lighthearted and facetious nature of rhetoric liberal memes tended to employ, thus “skating around” more important issues concerning threats to their ideologies, (2) the employment of text-based rhetoric rather than images, (3) the imitation of existing memes that consistently leads to disinterest over lack of originality, and (4) the lack of reaction-invoking content – the “politically correct” nature of rhetoric that made the memes somewhat lackluster as compared to their collective rage-inducing conservative counterparts.

These trends might be indicative of deeper underlying sociological phenomena in American society – particularly in terms of cultural perceptions surrounding the “conservative mindset” vs. the “liberal mindset.” When taking a deeper look into how these meme-trends are representative of American political culture, one can draw greater conclusions regarding the implementation of inaccurate data in conservative memes, and the lack of effective rhetorical appeals presented in liberal memes – thus leading up to the culmination of greater underlying thematic cultural differences and communication behaviors that potentially contributed to the victory of the (conservative) Republican Party at the conclusion of the 2016 election.
Citations:


