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2016 Presidential Election: Meme Wars

The 2016 Presidential Election went down in the books as one of the most bizarre and controversial in U.S. history. The disappointing result left millions of Americans scratching their heads and asking themselves how Donald Trump became the 45th president of United States, despite his sexual misconduct allegations, hateful rhetoric, and the links between his associates to Russian officials. When analyzing the factors that contributed to Trump’s victory, memes are often disregarded or overlooked. As peculiar as it may sound, political memes could have played a significant role on the outcome of this historic presidential election. Memes are powerful; their humor allows them to spread like wildfire across all social media platforms. Once memes go viral, they are seen by millions of people around the world. During the Presidential Election, there were countless of pro-Trump and anti-Clinton political memes circulating around social media. It is important to consider these political memes as powerful pieces of rhetoric because they have the potential to influence the ways people view political figures. For this paper, I will first analyze the context surrounding the U.S. political memes that I am examining; then I turn to visual rhetoric and metaphor in order to better inform and guide this study.

The term meme can be informally defined as an idea or cultural symbol that spreads at an exponential rate across various social media platforms; it is used and recognized by millions of internet users from around the world. The concept of a meme, according to Ben Schreckinger, Author of *World War Meme*, “has been around for decades. The term was first coined in 1976 by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who defined a meme as ‘a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation’—essentially a reproducible bit of the DNA of human culture” (4). Dawkins believed that the most effective memes where the ones that lodged to people’s brains and spread across societies, shaping human action (Dawkins 4). Some of the most recognized memes today include Gangnam Style, Doge, Pepe, and Grumpy Cat