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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 considering 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 in 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 was an endless amount 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; memes are 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*, “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 stuck to people’s brains and spread across societies, shaping human action. Furthermore, the term became notable upon the arrival of the “internet meme” (Schreckinger 4). Standard internet memes are usually composed of photographs depicting something humorous along with clever captions in white bolded letters. They generally address social and political issues but their scope extends far beyond. Internet memes are oftentimes created by anonymous online users. It is difficult to trace their roots or origin because they are perpetually remixed and republished numerous amounts of times. A few of the most recognized memes today include Gangnam Style, Doge, Pepe, and Grumpy Cat. Trends like the ALS ice bucket challenge, the mannequin challenge or the running man challenge are also often considered memes.

As stated before, the standard internet meme is usually composed of a photograph depicting a humorous object along with a clever caption in white bolded letters. The four political memes that I will be utilizing in my study follow the standard internet meme architecture; two of which are anti-Clinton and two of which are pro-Trump. My first anti-Clinton political meme pictures Clinton speaking into a microphone with the white bolded caption reading, “I DID NOT HAVE TEXTUAL RELATIONS WITH THE SERVER!” In the photograph, she is wearing a bright red blazer with a fierce look on her face. The second anti-Clinton political meme Photoshop’s Clinton behind a jail cell while her husband, former U.S. president, Bill Clinton laughs hysterically. Inside the jail cell, she is wearing an orange jumpsuit with handcuffs on her hands; the while bolded caption reads, “WANT TO VOTE FOR HILLARY? MAKE SURE YOU ARE IN THE JURY!” The third political meme that I will be examining is a photograph of Trump sitting in an office chair, pointing at the camera with the white bolded caption around him reading, “OBAMA YOU’RE FIRED.” My fourth and final political meme has two separate photographs stacked on top of each other. The top photo pictures Mr. Mime, a well-known fictional character from the Pokémon animated series, dancing happily on top of two magical barriers. Below Mr. Mime, the white bolded caption reads, “MR. MIME: THE BARRIER POKEMON. KNOWN TO MAKE WALLS AND HAVE SILLY HAIR.” The bottom photo pictures Donald Trump pointing directly at Mr. Mime with the white bolded caption below him reading, “THAT’S MY POKEMON.” It is quite clear that the target audience of these political memes are U.S. voters who use social media on a daily basis. The creators of these political memes remain unknown due to their massive circulation throughout social media platforms such as Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and 4Chan. Memes have a Darwinism life cycle; out of thousands that are created, only a few evolve and end up in massive circulation across various social media platforms.

**Memes, metaphors and visual rhetoric**

I will now analyze how metaphor and visual rhetoric work individually to further the understanding and significance of memes. A question that animates this statement is: How do memes representing President Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton rely on visual rhetoric and metaphor to present these candidates and their potential leadership to online audiences.

The rhetorical functions of metaphor are powerful. According to David Henry and Thomas R. Burkholder, “regardless of whether the figure is technically a metaphor or simile, it functions to embellish the style of a written or spoken message by making ideas vivid” (Kuypers 105). Viewing the political memes that I am analyzing through the lens of metaphor allows readers to better understand the arguments that are being made or the issues that are being addressed. Furthermore, Henry and Burkholder stress that “metaphors can determine how we think about issues and the actions we take with regard to those issues. That function of metaphor is arguably most obvious and potentially most powerful in political discourse and continues to be a source for current research dealing topics as diverse as Ground Zero discussion, President Obama’s use of movement metaphors, and the emergence of the democracy promotion industry.” (Kuypers 108). It is important to take the function of metaphor into consideration when analyzing the political memes in my study because they are metaphors in the form of photographs. Upon breaking down these political memes in the two terms of tenor (focus) and vehicle, (frame) the “readers or listeners are invited to see the comparison between the two” (Kuypers 106). Once this comparison is made, readers are able to join the conversation and make informed decisions about a specific political issue. Differentiating between tenor and vehicle is important because, “rhetorically, metaphors ask readers or listeners to comprehend one thing, represented by the tenor, ‘in terms of’ another, represented by the vehicle. When that happens, certain relevant and important characteristics of the vehicle are ‘carried over’ to the tenor, thus providing a new understanding of that term” (Kuypers 106).

Moving on, analyzing the visual components of political memes is crucial. According to J. David Cisneros, “Visual images create social visions, constitute identities, create public, and influence individual and group interrelationships. Images are not comprehensive by any means, as they are situated within textual and verbal contexts, yet the importance of analyzing the visual components of news messages is evident in the authenticity and evidentiary status often culturally attributed to news rhetoric” (Cisneros 573). Cisneros uses visual rhetoric to approach the issue of immigrants as pollutants. By using visual rhetoric to analyze the Love Canal contamination disaster, Cisneros was able to find a second representational theme in the coverage of toxic waste crises (577). The political memes in my study are perfect representations of visual rhetoric. Analyzing these political memes with the approach of visual rhetoric will allow the reader to dig deeper and uncover possible hidden themes within these political memes. Moreover, Eric S. Jenkins, author of, *The Modes of Visual Rhetoric: Circulating Memes as Expressions*, stresses that when analyzing images through visual rhetoric criticism, images can often evoke many different meanings and identifications (444). It is important to take into consideration the different meanings and identifications my chosen political memes evoke because not every reader will have the same response to the political issues being addressed by these political memes.

In conclusion, political memes are powerful; it is sometimes difficult to make out what they are trying to say. Once memes go viral, they are seen by millions of people around the world. During the Presidential Election, there was an endless amount of pro-Trump and anti-Clinton political memes circulating around social media. It is important to understand the meanings behind these political memes as they are powerful pieces of rhetoric that have the potential to influence the ways people view political figures. Approaching these political memes through the lens of metaphoric and visual perspective is important in order to understand the ideas and issues they are trying to convey.

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