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The 2016 Presidential Meme Wars

The 2016 United States presidential election went down as one of the most bizarre and controversial in United States history. The disappointing result left millions of Americans scratching their heads in confusion, questioning how a person such as Donald Trump had become 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 constituents that contributed to Trump’s victory, political memes are often disregarded or overlooked because majority of internet users might only see them as a source of entertainment. Political memes however, could have played a significant role in the outcome of this historic presidential election. Memes are influential fragments of rhetoric; their humor allows them to spread like wildfire across social media platforms. Once memes go viral, they are seen by millions of people from around the world. During the presidential election, there was an endless amount of pro-Trump and anti-Clinton political memes circulating around all kinds of social media platforms.

It is important to consider political memes as powerful pieces of rhetoric because they have the potential to influence the way people view political figures. Political memes are often heavily charged with popular culture references, gendered norms and broad humor. The political memes targeting Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton during the presidential election were effective because of their popular culture references to Pokémon, Bill Clinton’s scandal with Monica Lewinsky and Donald Trump’s reality television show, The Apprentice. A research question that expands this argument is: how do memes representing President Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton rely on humor and gendered arguments to visually present these candidates and their potential leadership to online audiences?

For this essay, I will first review the context surrounding my study by describing the social, political and historical backdrop that shaped the 2016 election cycle. Secondly, I will outline the importance of visual rhetoric as a rhetorical perspective and show how its key aspects further the analysis of my selected rhetorical artifacts. I then analyze how humor is used in the selected Clinton and Trump political memes, as well as the way in which they animate gendered arguments. Finally, I summarize the main arguments of this paper, answer my research question and issue a judgment and evaluation of the studied artifacts.

**The 2016 United States presidential election**

The road to the 2016 United States presidential election began with the 2016 presidential primaries. During the presidential primaries, social media platforms blew up with political content such as memes, articles, speeches, ads and videos endorsing political candidates. This political content could have had the potential to persuade undecided voters to side with a specific political party or political candidate. The Democratic Party presidential primaries were fought between Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and former U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. Throughout the Democratic presidential primaries, both candidates had similar views on the major issues that were up for debate. For example, both candidates proposed raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans to invest that revenue in clean energy, small businesses, infrastructure, education and healthcare (Tenenbaum). In addition to their similar views on economy and taxes, both Sanders and Clinton supported the strengthening of unions, universal childcare, college tuition reforms for students, and universal healthcare (Zitner, Chinni, & McGill). Despite their similar views however, Clinton appealed more to African-American voters, winning 75.9% of their votes, as well as people older than 30 years old (Zitner, Chinni, & McGill). According to statistics reported by Wall Street Journal, “Voters under the age 30 were the fuel behind Mr. Sander’s campaign. He won more than 70% of them…Still, seniors remained the larger group, and Mrs. Clinton won more than 70% of them” (Zitner, Chinni, & McGill). At the end of the democratic presidential primaries, Hillary Clinton was crowned victorious at the Democratic National Convention with a delegate count of 2,842 and a percentage of 55.2% (Politico). With 2,382 delegate votes needed to win, Clinton exceeded that by 460 votes whereas Sanders was short 517 with only 1,865 votes and a percentage of 43.1% (Politico).

In contrast to the Democratic presidential primaries, the 2016 Republican presidential primaries had three major candidates: Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio. Their stance on U.S. issues and policy varied significantly. When talking about education policy, both Trump and Cruz planned to eliminate the Department of Education while Rubio planned to expand charter schools across the U.S. (Tenenbaum). All three were in favor of overhauling the U.S. tax system and opposed estate taxes but had different opinions on the tax rates for businesses of all sizes. By the end of the Republican Party presidential primaries, Donald Trump had set a GOP record for the most primary votes ever (Politico). Trump surpassed the number of delegate votes needed to win by 204 votes and more than doubled the amount of delegate votes Cruz received (Politico). At the Republican National Convention, he was presented as the victor and became the Republican nominee that would compete against Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton in the 2016 United States presidential election.

During the 2016 Presidential race, there were concerns with the candidates who were running for office. A great deal of these concerns were expressed and highlighted through social media platforms in the shape of political memes. These political memes gained awareness and momentum as they circulated through social media platforms such as Reddit, iFunny, Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and 4Chan. Examples of these concerns encompass Donald Trump’s locker room talk, accusations of tax fraud, hateful rhetoric towards minority groups and allegedly connections to Russia. Likewise, controversies were expressed about Hillary Clinton; there were email speculations, sexist remarks, and re-iterations of her husband’s affair scandal. Each of these issues were emphasized by social media platforms and it allowed voters to raise questions and side with a specific candidate or political party. Before the 2016 presidential election kicked off, Hillary Clinton was projected to become the 45th president of the United States with an 85% chance of winning the election (New York Times). Clinton’s projection of winning the election made sense because her rhetoric and history was not as intense as Trump’s. On the night of the presidential election however, Donald Trump shook the world and beat Hillary Clinton. Although Hillary won the popular vote, Donald Trump won on electoral votes, 306 to 232 (CNN). The result left millions of American’s and people from around the world in a state of disbelief.

**Visual Rhetoric as a Perspective**

Analyzing the visual components of political memes is crucial. According to J. David Cisneros, “Visual images create social visions, constitute identities, create publics, 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). 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 that political memes evoke because not every viewer will have the same response to the political issues being addressed by these memes. The political memes in my study are perfect representations of visual rhetoric.

**Analyzing Political Memes**

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 were 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.

(road map for analysis here…) The 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. 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.

….(essay 1 analysis) During the presidential elections, most of the memes targeting Hillary Clinton had similar themes. The first meme I will be analyzing pictures Clinton speaking into a microphone with a caption around her that reads, “I DID NOT HAVE TEXTUAL RELATIONS WITH THE SERVER!” The caption makes this meme successful because during his time in office, former President of the United States, Bill Clinton was accused of having an affair with Monica Lewinsky. In one of his most iconic speeches, Bill Clinton denied these accusations by stating, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” By incorporating similar phrasing, this meme attempts to humiliate Hillary Clinton for Bill’s scandal during his presidency. The caption also seeks to ridicule Clinton for her email controversy in 2015. During her time as Secretary of State, Clinton was accused to have used her personal family’s email server to handle classified emails. Highlighting Hillary’s email accusation through the use of clever wordplay, allowed this meme to become one of the most popular throughout the presidential elections. Clinton’s bright red blazer, pose and face expression makes her look like a fierce dictator who is ready to take control; someone who you would not want to vote for.

When comparing the content between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton memes, one can easily observe that there is more variety in the memes addressing Trump. In the meme world, variety is usually a good thing. Trump’s reality television career could be a reasonable explanation for this larger amount of variety. The second meme that I will be examining shows Trump sitting in a chair, pointing at the camera. Like Clinton’s meme, Trumps also contains a caption which reads, “OBAMA YOU’RE FIRED.” Trump’s popular phrase, “you’re fired,” is recognized by millions of people around the U.S. because of Trump’s former TV show, *The Apprentice*. Using a phrase that is familiar to the general U.S. population to target Obama was a clever way to pull voters on Trump’s side. The picture’s setting, dim lighting, and Trump’s posture add a theme of positive masculine power. In addition to masculine power, Trump’s posture also adds a sense credibility because it is similar to the one the iconic Uncle Sam uses in the “I want you” posters.

**Conclusion of essay DOS**

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 visual perspective is important in order to understand the ideas and issues they are trying to convey.

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