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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 the 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 Trump and Clinton political memes circulating around all kinds of social media platforms.

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 (Schreckinger).

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 number 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 the 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 alleged 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). For many, 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.

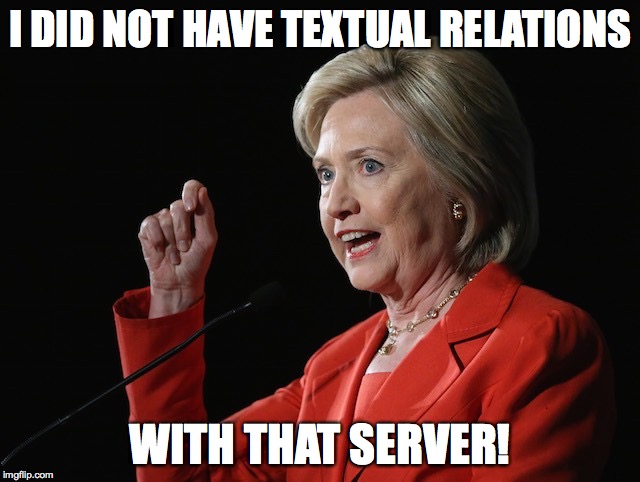
**Visual Rhetoric as a Perspective**

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. 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. 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. Analyzing these political memes with the approach of visual rhetoric, I will dig deeper and uncover possible hidden themes within these political memes. The political memes in my study constitute representations of visual rhetoric.

Following his statement on how visual rhetoric brings up new themes in visual images, Cisneros introduces a quote from Cori Dauber which states, “Because these images are presented in a context of ‘authenticity,’ they tend to be read not as representation but as evidence. Although our guard may be up when we encounter visual images (even photographic images) presented as advertisements or fiction, we tend not to utilize such defenses while watching or reading the news. Their very design encourages the reader to forget that images are constructed artifacts…. If imagery is powerful, it is all the more powerful when presented as ‘objective’” (573). When internet users come across political memes on social media, they probably view them as non-objective. If the political meme is visually aesthetic and humorous however, it might come off as objective. Therefore, it is important to pay close attention to the visual aspects of political memes because internet users could potentially view them as objective.

**Analyzing Political Memes**

Typical internet memes are usually composed of photographs depicting humorous content along with clever captions in white bolded letters. The four political memes that I will be analyzing in my case study follow the standard internet meme architecture; two of which target Hillary Clinton and two of which target Donald Trump. I chose these political memes based on their popularity when conducting a Google search, they were the most popular in terms of views, likes and shares. Besides their popular, these political memes also had similar gender and discipline themes. The first 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 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.” The 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 safe to assume that the target audience of these political memes are U.S. voters who use social media. 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.

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*Figure 1: Hillary Clinton Logic*

The first meme I will be analyzing pictures Hillary Clinton speaking into a microphone with a caption around her that reads, “I DID NOT HAVE TEXTUAL RELATIONS WITH THE SERVER!” (figure 1). When looking at this meme, the first thing that caught my attention was Clinton’s facial expression and bright red blazer followed by the caption. The caption makes this meme humorous because it references, former President of the United States, Bill Clinton’s affair scandal 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 political meme is an example of what scholar, Karrin Vasby Anderson would call pornification. According to Anderson, “Pornification highlights sexuality in contexts that otherwise are not normally sexualized and, though the use of crude humor or gender-based parody, disciplines individual who do not conform to traditional norms.” Clinton’s political meme is pornified by the what the visual caption conveys. The bright red blazer also adds pornification because red is usually seen as an exotic sexual color. Pornifying Clinton’s persona through visual rhetoric created a whole new gendered based theme that negatively impacted the way Clinton was viewed by internet users.

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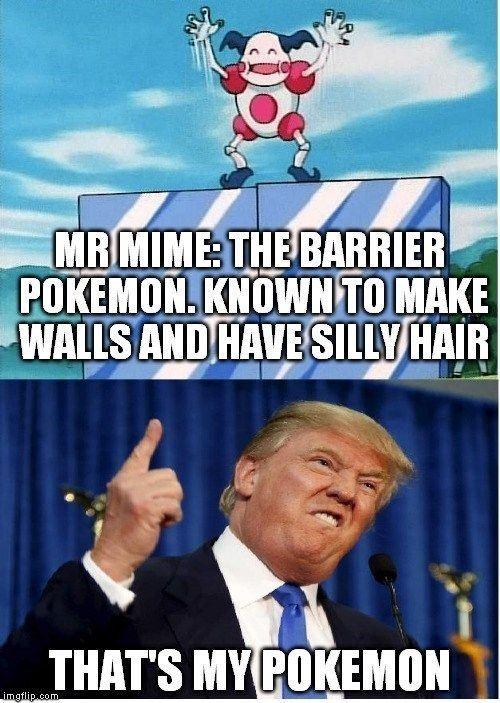
*Figure 2: Hillary for Prison*

The second political meme portrays Hillary Clinton behind a jail cell while her husband, Bill Clinton laughs outside of the cell (figure 2). In this political meme, Clinton is wearing an orange jumpsuit with handcuffs on her hands. The white bolded caption reads, “WANT TO VOTE FOR HILLARY? MAKE SURE YOU ARE IN THE JURY!” Looking at the visuals alone, users are able to generate a response as to what the political meme is attempting to express thanks to popular culture. The theme of discipline is highlighted by portraying Hillary Clinton as a prisoner. It underlines her email accusation and questions her leadership. The addition of Bill Clinton in this political meme furthers the argument of pornification and gendered roles. Bill Clinton’s visual pornifies this political meme because it represents his affair with Monica Lewinsky. The pornification of this political meme re-enforces gendered role arguments. The visual features portray Hillary Clinton as inferior to Bill Clinton and that creates a problem because she is no longer recognized as the Democratic candidate, she is recognized as Hillary plus Bill.

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*Figure 3: Donald Trump You’re Fired!*

When observing the content used in Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton political memes, there are significant comparisons that can be made. While conducting my research, I noticed that majority of the political memes involving Hillary Clinton referenced Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. Trump political memes, on the other hand, were solely based on him. The third political meme displays Trump sitting in a chair, pointing at the camera with a caption reading, “OBAMA YOU’RE FIRED.” Trump’s popular phrase, “you’re fired,” comes from his reality TV show, *The Apprentice*. The phrase is an example of popular culture and it is recognized by millions of people around the U.S. The visual features of this political meme’s setting, lighting, and Trump’s posture add a theme of masculinity which in turn adds to the gendered arguments theme. Masculinity is seen as a sign of strength which therefore makes this political meme more effective.

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*Figure 4: Donald Trump: That’s My Pokémon*

Similar the third political meme involving Trump, the fourth political meme references popular culture content (figure 4). It features Mr. Mime, a fictional character from the animated series, Pokémon. Below Mr. Mime, the caption reads, “MR. MIME: THE BARRIER POKEMON. KNOWN TO MAKE WALLS AND HAVE SILLY HAIR.” Below, Donald Trump points directly at Mr. Mime with the caption reading, “THAT’S MY POKEMON.” The addition of the pop culture series, Pokémon generates a humorous theme. At the time of the 2016 presidential election, Pokémon GO, a mobile game developed by Niantic, was extremely popular among people from all age groups. This political meme also ties in with discipline. During his campaign, Donald Trump promised to build a wall between the United States and Mexico to prevent illegal immigration. Comparing Donald Trump to Mr. Mime is humorous and that humor combines with discipline to give the viewer a sense of security when coming across this political meme.

**Summary**

Over the course of this paper, I have argued that it is important to consider political memes as powerful pieces of rhetoric because they have the necessary components to influence the way people view political figures. Political memes are often heavily charged with popular culture references, gendered norms and broad humor that it leaves viewers with a great deal of content to unpack. When internet users view generic political memes, they study the visuals, read a witty caption and react. The reaction of the viewer is important because it reveals their interpretation of the meme. Because the interpretation of political memes changes from viewer to viewer, I proposed the following research question: 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?

Over the course of this essay, I have given a response to the proposed research question by analyzing the four selected political memes. Although they both evoke the themes of gendered norms and discipline, we have seen that Hillary Clinton’s political memes differ from those of Donald Trump’s. Political memes targeting Hillary Clinton have been pornified through visual references to Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. The Bill Clinton’s affair references have a negative impact on Hillary Clinton’s image as a candidate because it gives the viewer a sense that she is dependent she is on him. This dependency could then portray her as inferior to Bill Clinton. Donald Trump’s political memes, on the other hand, are about him. The two Donald Trump political memes I analyze have visual characteristics that also convey the themes of gendered norms and discipline. These political memes however, portray these themes in a positive manner through visual rhetoric. As stated before, Trump’s political memes make him appear masculine and authoritative. It gives viewers the impression that he is a leader.

My case study matters for rhetorical studies because political memes are understudied. Through my arguments, I have shown that the study of memes is important because they have the potential to influence the way individuals portray political leaders. Further research on political memes could be used to study the way they portray political issues from around the world.

In conclusion, political memes are powerful; it is could be difficult for viewers to make out what they are trying to say. Once political memes go viral, they are seen by millions of people around the world. During the presidential election, there was an endless amount of Trump and Clinton political memes circulating around social media. It is important to understand the meanings and themes 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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