"Justin Trudeau—I Don't Know Her": An Analysis of Leadership Memes of Justin Trudeau

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ABSTRACT

Background *An internet meme is a concept or idea that spreads online. This article focuses on memes chronicling Justin Trudeau's leadership during his first year as prime minister.*

Analysis *By conceptualizing leadership memes and developing a methodology to analyze these memes, this empirical study reflects the approaches meme creators use, both visually and rhetorically, to convey political messages about leadership.*

Conclusion and implications *The main purpose of Justin Trudeau memes is denunciation. Leadership memes present an alternative discourse of politics, outside of controlled channels of the politician and the traditional media. There is little work on leadership memes. This article contributes to the literature by not only focusing on Canadian politics but also by providing a method for studying leadership memes.*

Keywords *Political internet memes; Leadership; Justin Trudeau; Content analysis*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Un mème Internet est un concept ou une idée qui se répand en ligne. Cet article porte sur les mèmes discutant du leadership de Justin Trudeau au cours de sa première année à titre de premier ministre.*

Analyse *Premièrement, en conceptualisant les mèmes du leadership et, deuxièmement, en élaborant une méthodologie pour analyser ces mèmes, cette étude empirique reflète les approches que les créateurs de mèmes utilisent, tant visuellement que rhétoriquement, pour transmettre des messages politiques sur le leadership.*

Conclusion et implications *Le but principal des mèmes de Justin Trudeau est la dénonciation. Les mèmes du leadership présentent un discours politique alternatif, en dehors des canaux contrôlés de l'homme politique et des médias traditionnels. Il y a peu de travail sur les mèmes du leadership. Le présent document contribue à la documentation non seulement en mettant l'accent sur la politique canadienne, mais aussi en fournissant une méthode pour étudier les mèmes du leadership.*

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Mots clés *Mèmes politiques internet; Leadership; Justin Trudeau; Analyse de contenu*

Introduction

The title of this article comes from a meme featuring an image of U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin with the phrase "Justin Trudeau—I don't know her." The tag line, a play on the very popular Mariah Carey meme,[1] is a dig at Trudeau as an irrelevant political neophyte with a feminizing critique. Memes, according to Limor Shifman (2013b) are pieces of "digital content that spreads quickly around the web in various iterations and becomes a shared cultural experience" (p. 18). Memes are appealing because they are sardonic and visually attractive, and they travel well online. The creation and sharing of political memes is becoming an activity of choice for some (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013a, 2013b; Silvestri, 2018). Memes can make politics more "entertaining and accessible" (Penney, 2017, p. 114).

Memes, political or otherwise, are shared through social media. The Social Media Lab reports that 94 percent of Canadian adults have an account on at least one social media platform (Gruzd, Jacobson, Mai, & Dubois, 2018). This makes Canada "one of the most connected populations in the world" (Gruzd, Jacobson, Mai, & Dubois, 2018, p. 4). This context, where citizens get information through social media (Gruzd et al., 2018; Smith & Anderson, 2018), makes internet memes one potential tool to shape political views. This article contributes to the Canadian political communication literature by focusing on one type of political internet meme: the leadership meme. The focus now turns to memes chronicling Justin Trudeau's leadership during his first year as prime minister of Canada. By conceptualizing leadership memes and through the development of a methodology to analyze these memes, this empirical study enables reflection on what leadership memes are about and the approaches meme creators use, both visually and rhetorically, to convey political messages. This article argues that political memes provide an alternative and uncontrolled discourse about politicians and leadership, thereby allowing for the anonymous discussion of the actions, policies, character, and personality of a politician.

As will be shown, there is little work on leadership memes, and most of it focuses on American presidential politics (Denisova, 2019). This article contributes to the political meme literature by not only focusing on Canadian politics but also by providing a method for studying leadership memes in the future. This research also contributes to an understanding of visual political communication. As Dan Schill (2012) points out, "[t]he visual aspects of political communication remain one of the least studied and the least understood areas [of research in the field]" (p. 119). This is especially pertinent for digital technologies (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Memes rely heavily on images and visuals, sharing affinities with advertising posters, political cartoons, and protest signs (Denisova, 2019). This analysis thus fills a knowledge gap about this new form of political activity, which may potentially gain traction among citizens over the next decade as the Canadian population is more connected and as visuals take on a greater importance in social media.

This article is organized as follows: the next section conceptualizes memes, starting with a general examination and then considering them in the context of politics.

The small body of research about leadership memes is also discussed. Next, the case study and methodology are outlined. This is followed by a presentation of the results. The main purpose of Justin Trudeau memes is denunciation—an open or public condemnation of his leadership. Meme creators openly and publicly mock Trudeau's personal leadership qualities and, at times, his policies and political actions. As such, leadership memes are an alternative venue for political expression and criticism. The article concludes with a discussion of the results, further conceptualization of leadership memes, and new research opportunities.

Conceptualizing memes

Before exploring the relationship between memes and politics, it is worth providing a more fulsome explanation of what memes are. As mentioned, an internet meme is a concept or idea that spreads online. Memes exist in a variety of digital forms, including email, text, images, videos, songs, and hashtags. Biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" in an effort to apply evolutionary theory to cultural change. The popularity of internet memes began in the late 1990s with the accessibility of the internet and graphic-edition software. They became mainstream by the mid-2000s. "Memes have matured into elements of commonly understood Web narratives.… Memes are a phenomenon of the Internet culture and a cherished communication artefact of our times" (Denisova, 2019, p. 10).

Internet memes are shared via social media, including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube, and Reddit, and also through meme creation sites such as Meme Generator. Some memes go viral in a couple of clicks as they are reposted and resent by multiple internet users on different platforms (Harlow, 2013). And if the creator is lucky, their memes may also get picked up by the legacy media and shared widely (see, for instance, Bruner 2017; Ojogbede 2018). For example, major news organizations, including the *New York Times*, covered the Tide Pod Challenge meme, where individuals post a video of themselves consuming the detergent pods. One factor in the popularity of memes is the ease of creation. Making memes is facilitated by an abundance of digital tools that can easily be used by anyone with minimal computer skills, using a smartphone, tablet, or computer, in a few minutes. Meme generator websites offer images that can be easily edited and shared online.

Memes address many topics—current news, sports, rumours, and celebrity gossip. One of the most popular types of memes, and the object of this study, is the image macro (Wiggins, 2019). This type of meme usually has a phrase on the top of the image that sets up the context of the message, and a bottom phrase with a witty message, punchline, or catchphrase (see Figure 1). Written in capital letters, the text is usually in the impact font, which is now associated with memes (Brideau & Berret, 2014). A number of memes have longevity; Grumpy Cat[2] and the Anti-Joke Chicken[3] are popular meme stock characters that continue to be used over and over. Chances are that if someone is on Facebook or Twitter, they will have been in contact with memes posted by a friend or relayed by the tradi-

Figure 1: Generic image macro meme*

**Source:* Lalancette, Small, & Provonost, 2019, p. 110

tional media. Image macro memes are likely to go viral and spread across the internet due to their "ease of adaptation and understanding" (Ross & Rivers, 2017, p. 2). While popular culture is often the focus of image macro memes, politics has not escaped.

Conceptualizing political memes

Elsewhere, the authors argue that memes perform two main political functions (Lalancette & Small, 2020). First, meme making is participatory, where individuals take part in larger debates about socio-political questions in a personal way and with their own means (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Lievrouw, 2011). Related memes can open politics up to different types of participants, including young people (Penney, 2017). Second, memes have an argumentative significance (Sci & Dewberry, 2015; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). As Anastasia Denisova (2019) points out memes "are beacons of public opinion and the condensed snapshots of the identity debates. Comparable to the tips of the icebergs, memes signify which collective and national identities receive approval, and which remain stumbling points" (p. 5). Memes can help identify trending political topics. This analysis is positioned within this second function.

In general, there are two strands of research in this area of study. In the first type of research, studies use memes to understand political protest movements. Memes related to Occupy Wall Street (Huntington, 2015; Milner, 2012), Black Lives Matter (Clark, 2016), and the Egyptian Arab Spring (Gerbaudo, 2015) have been examined. The second strand, where this research positions itself, explores the way citizens assess the leadership of politicians through the creation of memes. This category will be discussed in more detail later in this section. What links these two strands is a common understanding that political memes are both a form of political participation and are discursive in nature.

Merlyna Lim (2013) argues that social media enables multiple and diverse networked spheres to emerge and allows for greater social and cultural participation from citizens. Activism on social media is more successful if it is simple, associated with low-risk actions and also consistent with larger societal narratives. As such, scholars see political memes as part of the new participatory culture developing from digital technologies (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2015; Shifman, 2013b). Participatory culture is defined as a culture

> with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009, p. 3)

Memes facilitate participation on both the creation and consumption sides. As mentioned, there are numerous digital tools that allow for the creation of memes. Political memes allow people to participate in politics in easy, accessible, and entertaining ways. Memes may draw lay citizens to politics and incite engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Heiskanen, 2017). This may be especially true for millennials, who have a unique relationship to social media (Boulianne, 2019; Smith & Anderson, 2018). On the consumption side, because they appear on one's social media, political memes are easy to

share and like. Denisova (2019) describes political memes as "fast-food media" (p. 5). Because of their style and humour, memes are a good way to dive into political issues; they take complicated issues and make them easier to digest. Accordingly, political memes have the capacity to "promote civic awareness, and to connect individual creativity to collective expression" (Silvestri, 2018, p. 3998). For instance, Ryan Milner (2013) examined Occupy Wall Street memes and showed that creating memes, sharing them, and using images and references from popular culture allows a positive relationship between users, creating conversation and new modes of expression and engagement.

That said, the participatory culture theory has its limits. Among them, Henry Jenkins, Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice Jenkins (2009) identify three: 1) a participation gap; 2) a transparency problem; and 3) an ethics challenge. The "participatory gap" is related to the digital divide, wherein access to technology and media literacy creates obstacles to participation. The transparency problem lies in the deluge of information citizens have to face every minute of every day. Finally, the ethics challenge is linked to possible manipulation by companies that own the platforms and by the fact that some people are more gullible than others since they do not have the digital literacy tools to interpret, understand, and criticize internet content. Thus, while some laud this new form of participation, others are less convinced. The creation, liking, and sharing of memes is sometimes considered "slacktivism." Slacktivism is an accusation that online political activities have little real-world impact and that digital technologies make politics so easy and quick that its main purpose is increasing "the feel-good factor of the participants" (Christensen, 2016, par. 3). Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Kjerstin Thorson (2015) discuss this tension in their analysis of the *Kony 2012* video.[4] Reaction to *Kony 2012* in memes was criticized as not real political activism, doing little to stop the Ugandan warlord.

Beyond participation, scholars see memes as having a discursive or argumentative quality (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015); they are artefacts of political debate, discussion, and arguments about social and political questions (Sci & Dewberry, 2015). Seeing memes as artefacts allows us to draw our attention to its purposeful production and consumption in the digital world (Wiggins, 2019). In general, memes are not a genre created to celebrate politics, rather they offer a critical assessment of political events, issues, or controversies (Ross & Rivers, 2017) or a potent tool for political deliberation online (Denisova, 2019) and a good way to study discourse and ideology (Wiggins, 2019). Memes are often used to protest and criticize politics. As Barbara Warnick and David Heinemand (2012) point out, the analysis of political memes "can teach us more about the relationship between circulation of discourses and rhetoric in digital contexts" (p. 72). Take Heidi Huntington's (2015) analysis of the Pepper Spray Cop memes shared during the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in California.[5] She demonstrates that Pepper Spray Cop memes used images and discourses to make claims about the myth of the American Dream. Moreover, memes express citizen expectations about politicians and their political actions (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2015; Lalancette, Small, & Pronovost, 2019; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015).

It is within this category of discursiveness that leadership meme analysis can be located. Leadership memes focus on the personality or political actions of a political

leader (e.g., heads of government or legislators). This research is concerned with the messages (both rhetorically and visually) presented about politicians and leadership in meme form. Much of this academic work focuses on American presidential politics, and most of it suggests that leadership memes serve as a method of critiquing politicians—in terms of their personal attributes, policy preferences, and/or political actions. For instance, Susan Sci and David Dewberry (2015) analyzed the memes created during and after Joe Biden's participation in a 2012 vice-presidential debate in order to criticize his performance. Benjamin Burroughs (2013) studied the leadership memes trolling Barack Obama during the 2012 election. He highlights that memes allowed citizens to express their political identity and larger cultural values in their networks. Moreover, he considers these memes as "a practice that facilitates, through the technological affordances of memes, the exposition of emotions that otherwise would not be expressed within the public sphere" (p. 259). Andrew Ross and Damian Rivers (2017) used a discourse analysis to assess image macro memes produced during the 2016 United States presidential election. They focused on memes delegitimizing Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Their analysis reveals four delegitimization strategies: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and myth-making.[6] In another study, Denisova (2019) showed how meme makers used Donald Trump discourses in order to make fun of and criticize Hillary Clinton, amplifying and propagating his discourse about how "crooked" she was. In Russia, she found out that memes heavily criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was presented as embodying the country, and discussed the manipulation of the state and his uses of media propaganda. Another study of leadership memes in 2016 found that while all U.S. politicians were presented negatively, this was especially true for female politicians, who were criticized more severely in regard to their character and skills (Spencer, 2017). Outside of the United States, there is less work on leadership memes. One Canadian study explores the leadership of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, finding that memes were critical of the politics and political actions of Harper but were seldom about his personality (Lalancette, Small, & Pronovost, 2019). Harper memes refer to specific political decisions and demonstrated a high level of knowledge about Canadian politics.

While most analyses find that politicians are heavily criticized in meme form, Joel Penney's (2017) work comes to a different conclusion. He discusses the #BabiesForBernie meme that developed in the 2016 presidential primaries. #BabiesForBernie were photos of babies dressed by their parents in Bernie Sanders' signature white hair and glasses. Penney (2017) observed that memes such as #BabiesForBernie are unofficial political marketing tools to support a candidate. Here leadership memes bring people into the political campaign, albeit unofficially. Hence, citizens may come to create memes with diverse intentions and purposes—they might want to entertain their friends and family, make a joke about current political events, or take part in a larger cultural and political debate. The creation and dissemination of memes is a complex cultural practice and it is not known who creates the memes, maybe they are lay citizens, politically savvy citizens, or even political operatives aiming to criticize their opponent in a similar way to Twitter trolls; we may even find some slackers in the groups—people wanting to express themselves but with a low threshold.

This review of related literature should demonstrate that political memes are understudied. This research explores and theorizes leadership memes further. Leadership memes are important digital artefacts that discuss the personality, character, policies, and actions of politicians using unique visual and rhetorical methods. They provide an opportunity to explore public arguments and opinions about political leaders within a given time period. In what follows, empirical research of leadership memes—what they are and what they can do—supplements this theorization.

Case study and methodology

This research focuses on leadership memes made about Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Elected in 2015 with a large majority in the House of Commons, Trudeau is a notable leader in Canadian politics in a number of ways. First, he moved the third-placed Liberal Party from 36 seats to 184 seats, which is the largest numerical increase by a party in a Canadian election. Trudeau is also the son of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the third-longest-serving prime minister in Canadian history. The Canadian and international media were transfixed with Pierre Elliott Trudeau. The term "Trudeaumania" is used to describe his celebritization (Marland, 2014). Justin Trudeau has followed in his father's footsteps with his own brand of "Trudeaumania" (Lalancette & Cormack, 2018). Trudeau is followed by the prime minister's office photographer who captures his every move, the images are then posted on social media (Andrew-Gee, 2016). Trudeau's Instagram account boasts more than three million followers (as of February 2020). Indeed, research on Trudeau's Instagram feed suggests that his visual rhetoric and storytelling emphasize his youth, attractiveness, and positivity in both personal and political situations (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). While Trudeau and his team have control over some aspects of his image (e.g., social media), they do not control media coverage. Justin Trudeau has been the object of constant scrutiny in the traditional media.[8] Since this election, there has been an interest in his public and private life by both Canadian and international media organizations, including American magazines *Vogue* and *Rolling Stone*. And while there is considerable adoration for the Canadian prime minister in the legacy media, there are also sharp criticisms that suggest that he might be more style than substance (e.g., Shapiro, 2016). As such, Justin Trudeau in meme form presents an interesting case. Similar to the media, memes are an uncontrolled discourse about him.

Two questions structure this analysis: What do leadership memes say about politics? What are the topics and approaches (visually and rhetorically) used by meme creators when focusing on leadership? In order to answer these questions, a content analysis is conducted of a sample of Justin Trudeau memes collected in 2016, the first year of his government. As mentioned, the focus is on the image macro meme. Google Images is used to locate memes using the search terms: "Trudeau memes," "Trudeau political internet memes," "Justin Trudeau memes and politics." A Justin Trudeau meme is defined as one that directly or indirectly refers to the leader in the set-up, punchline, and/or image. Memes were collected at two points in time (June 2016 and December 2016). In total, 178 Justin Trudeau memes were collected using the above search terms. The use of Google Images is an attempt to be systematic in an area where this is extremely difficult. Most people are exposed to memes in an unsolicited way,

that is, they see memes that were shared on their own personal social media. If one wants to study tweets or online video, one goes to Twitter or YouTube, respectively. Indeed, a well-constructed Twitter API can scrape all tweets in a particular date range, as well as other relevant information such as users and retweets. To our best knowledge, there is no comparable approach. Simply put, there is no clearinghouse for memes. Many studies rarely discuss meme collection techniques or attempt to collect a comprehensive sample, instead focusing on analyzing typical cases of memes (see, for instance, Bratich, 2014; Huntington, 2015; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). Some scholars use meme generator sites such as Meme Generator, Know Your Meme, or Political Meme to collect memes. For instance, Ross and Rivers (2017) collected a sample of 26 leadership memes using two meme generator sites. While these sites may allow for the collection of a large quantity of memes, they are for a more technologically savvy user. Both these approaches are rejected here, this study opts instead for a sample from Google Images. As Google Images boasts that it is the most comprehensive image database in the world, it was used as a matter of convenience to create a sample that is worth analysis. There are certainly limitations to this approach.

In order to understand the leadership memes of Justin Trudeau, a content analysis of the language and the visual component of the memes was conducted. Content analysis is a common method in political communication research. It is the measurement of the dimensions of the content of a message or a message in a specific context. "Content analysis can be employed to describe a group of related messages, draw inferences about the sources who produced those messages, or draw inferences about the reception of those messages by their audience" (Benoit, 2011, p. 292). By assessing the content of the memes—the relationship between the text and the images selected—this study was able to inductively identify specific issues/themes that were discussed by the citizens who created the memes.

Each meme was analyzed for four factors: image, focus, topics, and tone. First, the image type was considered and the image used was described. In addition to assessing if an image was used more than once in the sample, it was also noted if the image appeared homemade or if a stock meme image was used. A homemade meme image is one where two or more disparate images are put together to create a new image. A stock meme image is one that uses a popular meme image that is unrelated to politics, and the image and narrative structure of the meme has been applied to politics. Second, the primary focus of the meme was assessed. Memes could be categorized as governance or personality. Governance memes primarily focus on political actions and decisions by leaders and their party, and may include a policy area or bill as part of the meme. Personality memes primarily focus on a leader's persona and/or physical appearance with no reference to government or politics. Memes that did not fit into either governance or personality were coded as other. Next, the topic of the meme was noted. While a few topics that might appear in the sample based on issues and policies that had dominated Trudeau's time in office thus far were identified, a list of topics was also inductively created from the memes themselves. Finally, each meme was analyzed for the primary tone. Each meme was coded as positive, neutral, or negative. As per Tamara Small (2017), the digital content needed to be very clearly positive or negative

to be coded as such. Accordingly, some of the subtler tones in the memes may have been missed.

One of the authors and a trained coder coded a sample of memes.[9] Cohen's kappa was used to estimate intercoder reliability, which measures the extent to which independent coders make the same coding decisions. Cohen's kappa is a conservative measure of intercoder reliability, ranging from 0–1.00. Larger values indicate better reliability; 0.80 represents very high intercoder reliability, while 0.60 represents acceptable intercoder reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Kappa in this study was 0.767. Following the test, the researchers discussed the discrepancies between the coding before the complete sample of memes was assessed.

There are issues of generalization because of the focus on a single case. Leadership memes tend to be focused on the top leadership positions in Canada or elsewhere such as the prime minister (Lalancette & Small, 2020; Lalancette, Small, & Pronovost, 2019). While leadership memes do exist for leaders of third- or fourth-placed parties, they exist in far fewer numbers.[10] Fewer memes also exist for provincial premiers or mayors. Thus, a comparative analysis of leadership memes in the Canadian context is difficult. However, this methodology provides a template for further and future study of leadership memes in Canada and in other political systems.

Results

Image macro memes are a subtle marriage of images and text, the synergy between the two creating the magic and the wit of the meme message, thus this study begins with discussing the images used before analyzing the rhetorical content. When it comes to Justin Trudeau, a wide array of images is used. Only 13 images were used more than once, comprising only 39 memes, or 21.9 percent of the sample. Most meme images were used only once. Because of this, it is difficult to draw any broad conclusions about images. However, one thing that did stand out is that it appears that meme creators are very deliberate in their selection of images. That is, meme images are often very much connected to meme topics and content. This helps to explain the wide variety of images used. For instance, if a meme creator wants to talk about Justin Trudeau and Barack Obama, the meme maker would select or make an image that had them it.

This finding can be seen in two main ways in this sample. First is the use of stock meme images. The use of stock images means that the meme creator ties what they want to say about the leader and/or their party into the broader narrative framework of that meme. As Ross and Rivers (2017) note, "memes can extend their appeal beyond digital cultures and into broader popular culture through making connections with emotions and feelings related to a particular belief or position held" (p. 2). The first image in Figure 2 is illustrative of a stock image meme. This meme features the "skeptical Third World kid." The purpose of this meme is to highlight hypocrisy, especially by those living in the First World. In this particular case, the meme focuses on the Liberal's Syrian refugee policy; it highlights that Trudeau and the Liberals were criticized for the policy in and of itself, and also for not executing the policy effectively. This meme perfectly marries the policy of the Trudeau Liberal government within the parameters of the narrative qualities of this meme (i.e., hypocrisy). Almost 15.5 percent of memes in the sample used a stock meme image. Others include "Hey Girl/Feminist

Ryan Gosling" (discussed below), the Kevin Durant MVP speech, One Simply Does Not, and Leave Britney Alone. Stock image memes are easy to create. These images are standard in meme sites. All a meme creator has to do is type in the top and bottom text, hit submit, and the meme is created. To create such memes, meme creators need to understand both Canadian politics and broader meme popular culture. As Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman (2017) point out, the rules and conventions of online communities need to be respected. Cultural conventions and social functions are important in order to belong to a community. Meme creators influence and are influenced by popular culture. They aim at a specific crowd, in this sense the memes are not created and posted randomly (Niessenbaum & Shifman, 2017).

Figure 2: Examples of meme images

Source: Anonymous

Source: Anonymous

The second type of image that demonstrates a deliberate connection between image and content is the homemade meme. A homemade meme image is one where two or more disparate images are put together to create a new image (see the second image in Figure 2). Here four unique images are put together to create a meme to criticize Trudeau's inexperience (a common theme in the sample) and allege that he is only a leader because of who his father is, making him similar to North Korean despot Kim Jong Un. The second image in Figure 3 is another example of a homemade meme. Almost one in five memes in the sample were coded as homemade (19.7%). Indeed, homemade memes are the most common single type of image found in the analysis. This shows real commitment to the political action on behalf of a meme creator. Not only does the meme creator need to understand Canadian politics, come up with the humorous text, he or she must also create an image rather than selecting a stock meme image or taking a photo from the internet. With citizens creating their own memes in order to convey their message, memes could be seen as tools for expression and public discussion (Shifman, 2013b). The use of homemade memes can be a sign that political meme making cannot be considered merely slacktivism. Homemade meme such as the ones in Figures 2 and 3 are far more time-consuming than liking a political group on Facebook or retweeting some political content. Meme creators, especially those who make their own images, are engaging in a thoughtful process of political discourse and expression. Overall, visuals are important in these leadership memes. The images used convey significant amounts of information about Justin Trudeau and are intimately tied to meaning making. Here, this can be linked back to affect. Meme creators and sharers allow citizens to share their views about politics and leaders in humorous ways, while

making a point about politics. Conclusions about image choice serve to show that memes are thus part of the larger cultural public sphere where emotions and reason coexist.

Figure 3: Examples of positive memes

Source: Anonymous

Source: Anonymous

Table 1 shows the results for the tone of Trudeau memes. Almost three quarters of all memes were negative (see Figures 4, 5, and 6 for examples). This study confirms previous findings that denunciation is the main purpose of leadership memes, as seen in the cases of U.S. politicians Joe Bidden, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Similar to those studies, it is clear memes are definitely not a tool for praise. As a matter of fact, the type or topic of the meme does not matter, meme creation is mainly about criticizing Trudeau as a person and as a leader, and to a lesser extent the policies of the Liberal government. Only one in ten memes place Trudeau in a positive light. Figure 3 provides two examples of memes that portray Trudeau positively. The second example draws from broader meme culture using the "Hey Girl/Feminist Ryan Gosling" format. "Hey Girl" memes feature various images of Canadian actor/heartthrob Ryan Gosling, where "Hey Girl" is the set-up (top text) and the punchline (bottom text) is a description of the ways in which Gosling is a great and sensitive boyfriend (Rankin, 2016). "Feminist Ryan Gosling" is a subset of the "Hey Girl" memes, where the bottom text is some sort of feminist statement. In a 2016 interview with *Vox*, the interviewer discusses the "Feminist Ryan Gosling" memes with

Table 1: Meme tone

	Number	Percentage (%)
Negative	133	74.7
Neutral	27	5.2
Positive	18	10.1
Total	**178**	**100**

Figure 4: Examples of personality memes

Source: Anonymous

Source: Anonymous

Trudeau and asks if he would be willing to pose for a photo to create feminist memes (Plank, 2016). Trudeau agreed (these memes are included in the sample). While Feminist Justin Trudeau memes present Trudeau in a positive light, they are in the minority of the sample. However, this is another example of a meme that is connected to broader meme culture. As Justin Trudeau has expressed on many occasions that he is a feminist (*Guardian*, 2016), he was invited to speak about his feminism at the Women in the World Summit in New York in April 2017, it is not surprising that he would be lauded in a feminist meme.

Figure 5: Examples of Western alienation memes (Political)

Source: Anonymous

Source: Anonymous

Figure 6: Examples of other memes related to current events

Source: Anonymous

Source: Anonymous

Turning to the purpose of leadership memes, Table 2 shows that almost 40 percent focus on Trudeau's personality. Figure 4 provides two examples of personality memes. The first meme refers to an encounter between Prime Minister Trudeau and Prince George at the beginning of the royal visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in 2016, where the prince rebuffs Trudeau's attempt to high-five him. The event was widely discussed in the Canadian and British media and on social media. The stock macro image used is "And Then I/We Said," which features several politicians, including Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush, laughing at a hilarious (unknown) joke. The meme maker is trying to imply that Trudeau's attempts to high-five the young prince mean he is not particularly smart. The second meme features former Alberta Premier Rachel Notley. The meme references the

Table 2: Meme purpose (*N* = 178)

	Number (Percentage, %)
Governance	54 (30.3)
Personality	71 (39.9)
Other	53 (29.8)

movie *Dumb and Dumber* and compares Trudeau and Notley to the movie's two main characters. In addition to this meme, 13 other Trudeau and Notley comparisons were found in the sample. Some were focused on personality, such as this one, while others were focused on governance. There were also two memes that compared Trudeau with former Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne in a similar negative fashion. These two memes typify Trudeau personality memes in the sample, Trudeau is portrayed as incompetent, inexperienced, stupid, and/or shallow. Here we can see similarities with Ross and Rivers (2017), who highlight that political memes delegitimize Trump and Clinton by focusing on their personal affairs, physical appearance, and persona. By comparing Trudeau with other heads of state or premiers and by presenting him laughing at citizens, a moral evaluation is realized.

Returning to the tone of memes, this study compared the type of meme to its tone (see Table 3). Seventy-eight percent of personality memes were negative (see Figure 4). The assessment is in line with citizen's expectations of politicians. Political science has shown that specific qualities play a role when citizens select a leader. Qualities such as honesty, intelligence, friendliness, sincerity, and trustworthiness are important when assessing politicians (Bittner, 2011). As such, these memes are a method by which some citizens can express their displeasure that Trudeau has been elected. This is quite different than a previous study, where less than one in five Harper memes focused on personality (Lalancette, Small, & Pronovost, 2019). With Trudeau, the man, not his politics, is at the forefront of leadership memes. This is in line with the personalization of politics strategies used by parties and media (Karvonen, 2010; Lalancette, Drouin, & Lemarier-Saulnier, 2014) and with the broader context of the blurring of the lines between pop-culture practices and celebrity politics. In this context, private life, character, and style become elements to assess politicians and their performance (Corner & Pals, 2003; Van Zoonen, 2006). Highlighting the personality of leaders and candidates is now a key feature of modern politics. The personalization of politics is also considered a form of "communication adaptation" from politicians in order to fit the process of mediatization (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013).

Only thirty percent of all memes focused on the governance of Trudeau and the Liberal Party (30.3%). A governance meme is one that focuses on political actions and decisions by Trudeau and/or the Liberals, especially where a policy area or legislative action is mentioned or implied. Even though there are few governance memes, they are considerably more negative than personality memes (Table 3). Almost 91 percent of governance memes were denunciations of policy and government action of Trudeau and the Liberals. They would be what Ross and River's (2017) refer to as "rational delegitimization" (p. 5), where the goal is to present a critical assessment of what Trudeau is doing wrong within an institutionalized setting. There

Table 3: Meme tone by type of meme (*N* = 178)

	Negative	Neutral	Positive	**Total**
Governance	90.7%	3.7%	5.6%	**100%**
Personality	77.5%	8.5%	14.1%	**100%**
Other	54.7%	35.8%	9.4%	**100%**

was not a particular political issue or controversy that dominated these memes. Issues such as the Liberal pledge to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees (see Figure 2), Trudeau's support for Bill C-51 (antiterrorism legislation), and the legalization of marijuana were topics of more than one meme (two and three, respectively). The only political issue that has spawned a considerable number of memes concerns Trudeau and the Liberal Party's relationship with Western Canada (Figure 5). Western alienation is a sentiment of regional discontent with the federal government within Western Canada (Berdahl, 2010). The Liberal Party of Canada has long had a strained relationship with the West (Bickerton, Gagnon, & Smith, 1999). Since the 1920s, it has had little electoral success in the West, especially in the province of Alberta. Western alienation reached its nadir in the 1980s, with the introduction of the National Energy Program by Justin Trudeau's father. Western alienation memes present Trudeau as unable to understand the concerns of Alberta and the West: equalization, oil politics, and the fires in Fort McMurray. Sixteen memes in this sample focused on political issues of the West vis-à-vis the Trudeau Liberals. The Trudeau-Notley memes, mentioned above, also feature a Western alienation component. These memes fit into this article's broader conclusion that memes are political action. These memes are a digital but tangible expression of Western alienation.

As Table 2 shows, one third of memes were neither coded as political nor personality. While there is a wide array of memes in the "other" category, there were some that related to the broader political context in Canada. The 2015 federal election is one such example. Several memes focused on Trudeau and Liberal supporters. These memes directly refer to Trudeau or Liberals or include an image of him. As the first image in Figure 6 shows, people who support Trudeau and the Liberals are strongly criticized and are painted as stupid and foolish. Elbowgate is another political event that figured in the sample. It occurred in the House of Common in May 2016 during a vote on doctor-assisted suicide. In the event, Justin Trudeau is seen to be accidentally elbowing a female Member of Parliament (MP) in an attempt to move a male Conservative MP, who was blocking the aisle. The event created a scandal for the prime minister both online and in the mass media, with opposition members accusing him of "manhandling." Five memes focused on elbowgate; most making fun of the situation but also making fun of the fact that Justin Trudeau was the one accused of "manhandling" a woman. The previous discussion of Trudeau as a feminist is relevant to these memes. The second meme in Figure 6 is a play on Trudeau's very popular justification for gender parity in the cabinet. When a journalist asked him why, Trudeau quipped, "Because it's 2015." Thus, Trudeau continues to be a feminist, because he is comfortable elbowing women in 2015. While many memes are clearly tied to political issues and political events of the day, a significant number of them in this sample are divorced from public policy. Trudeau meme creators are motivated by far more than a strong dislike of the Liberal leader. As mentioned, this is very different from the findings regarding Stephen Harper, where memes were "not simply about making fun of a politician, but challenging a politician's politics and policies" (Lalancette, Small, & Pronovost, 2019, p. 120). It is possible that the difference is the result of the fact that the Liberal brand focuses mostly on Trudeau's leadership (Proudfoot, 2016). This may

also be a function of when the analysis was conducted. Harper had been in office for more than a decade, which may have provided meme creators more policies to criticize compared to Trudeau, who had only been in office for a year at the time of analysis. It is plausible that meme focus changes the longer a politician is in office.

Summary of results

This article has explored one type of political meme, the leadership meme, thus addressing a gap in the literature by considering the role that political memes play in political communication. Leadership memes focus on the personality or political action of a political leader, including heads of government or members of legislatures. While political memes are understudied, very little research has explored the portrayal of leaders and leadership in meme form. These studies suggest that such memes are a form of delegitimization (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017), denunciation (Huntington, 2015; Lalancette, Small, & Pronovost, 2019), and political evaluation (Spencer, 2017), and provide an alternative interpretation or discourse, both visually and rhetorically, about political leadership. This sample of Justin Trudeau memes presents a more refined understanding of leadership memes. First, further evidence is found that denunciation is the main purpose of political memes. When people engage with this type of political activity, they generally do so to *openly* and *publicly* criticize a leader, both from a personal and political standpoint. Only a few memes are praising Trudeau. In this case, they discuss his feminism and political decisions about gender parity. Memes can thus be considered as being part of a broader conversation about political practices and expectations about politicians. While the political ethos of Justin Trudeau is mainly positive in the media, there is a sharp contrast between his image-making and criticism about his personality found in memes. Further, leadership memes are steeped both in politics and meme culture. Meme creators clearly understand the narrative dimensions and frameworks of the image macro and fashion their political criticism within them. The connection between the image and the message is a strong one, and meme creators discussed specific aspects of Canadian politics with their creations. Moreover, political meme creators were really imaginative when designing their memes. While they follow the cultural conventions of the meme community, they innovate by making their own memes in order to convey their message. Meme creation looks more like grassroots action and a mode of discussion and debate rendered possible by digital technologies.

Discussion

Memes have two interwoven political functions: argumentation and participation. The data presented has commented more directly on the first function. However, this final section takes the opportunity to reflect on the data with regard to the function of political participation. Memes have an argumentative angle, where citizens can challenge dominant narratives through humour. As mentioned, politicians use image management techniques to promote particular leadership qualities, such competence, responsiveness, honesty, intelligence, friendliness, sincerity, and trustworthiness (Lalancette & Tourigny-Koné, 2017). There is considerable evidence that the team around Justin Trudeau spends considerable effort in crafting a particular image, one of a young and

dynamic leader promoting feminism and multiculturalism who is able to connect with a variety of groups and crowds (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Examining this data, what arguments are put forward? What narratives are challenged? When criticizing Trudeau's perceived hypocrisy, meme makers are implying that he is a dishonest politician. In a similar way, meme makers criticizing his knowledge and experience are implying that he is incompetent and shallow. When discussing Western alienation, they are implying that all provinces are not treated fairly. And more positively, when praising Trudeau's feminism, meme makers are cheering the fact that he is pursuing equality between woman and men. Aside from feminism, Trudeau memes are evidence that he is not living up to the expectations of some citizens. They are also in line with a study by Ross and Rivers (2017) about memes used as tools for the legitimizing and delegitimizing of political actors in the American presidential campaign.

Since there is evidence of the argumentative and persuasive nature of memes, this data provides food for thought about the goals and intentions of meme makers. By stating their expectations about politics, meme creators and sharers can display their affective relationship to politics. In Zizi Papacharissi's (2015) work on affect in politics, affective publics can be conceptualized as "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiments" (p. 125). For Papacharissi, memes shared from person to person present structures of feeling, which are feelings organized and patterned in ways that allow fluidity and offer possibilities to connect (and divide) the public. The memes in this sample seem to be grounded in affect, that is, they are affective statements allowing citizens to communicate their expectations and sometimes frustrations about how politicians govern. Memes are easy to share, open and easy to understand, and are, therefore, demonstrative of the mood of the time. Memes permit people to, using Papacharissi's (2015) phrase, "feel their way into politics" (p. 118). Therefore, memes are related to what scholars call the cultural public sphere (Dahlgren, 2009; McGuigan, 2005), where emotions and entertainment have a place in politics. Memes do not have agency per se, since they rely on humans to share them and make them viral, but they do have the power to influence the way citizens are perceiving issues and political actors.

Certainly, the creation and propagation of memes do raise the question of being spread in echo chambers where citizens share and endorse similar opinions. This might create a false perception of universality for some issues and events. Particularly if individuals only talk between themselves and disregard or overlook official leaders and institutional organizations. Also, let us not forget the limits of the participatory culture theory discussed previously (Jenkins et al., 2009): participation gaps, transparency problems, and ethics challenges. However, by using alternative political messaging such as memes, politically engaged citizens can create messages that are attractive and could eventually bring disinterested individuals to politics and political action.

While there is a link between memes and participation, different forms of research methods are required to study this more directly. As discussed earlier, there is limited scholarship on leadership memes. One key area of future research should be related to the viral component of memes. Some memes go viral while others do not. Knowing that the viral contagion of memes is facilitated when they create/trigger a strong emo-

tional response (Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie, 2013), it could be interesting to assess the popularity of leadership memes. Emotions such as humour and outrage may be salient in the spreadability of online content (Highfield, 2017; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Lievrouw, 2011). Researchers need to develop ways to assess the uses of humour and political parody within memes. Finally, meme creation needs to be explored more fully. Who creates memes? What is their purpose? What is the level of political engagement and knowledge of meme creators? It is a small number of people creating a large number of memes or just one-off meme creators? For instance, Denisova (2019) reached out to Russian meme creators and interviewed some of them. She highlighted the fact that meme creators wanted to inform, raise awareness, and draw attention to issues in order to trigger a discussion. In this sense, meme creators could be viewed as counter-publics. They are, for her, new journalists, civil activists, and political protesters.

Political memes appear to be widespread. Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, and Angela Merkel are current political leaders that are the subject of memes. From this non-systematic exploration of these leadership memes, it appears that political leaders are being criticized by people all over the world. Yet, surprisingly little is known about this political practice. These global memes indicate that there is much work to be done in the area of leadership memes. This analysis is just one attempt to address this gap. Comparative analysis that includes leaders beyond Canada would provide a more fulsome understanding of the argumentative significance of memes and highlight any country-specific factors that may occur. Realizing multiple-comparative case studies would certainly help us understand not only the inherent characteristics of leadership memes but also their cultural specificities since, "sociocultural context informs the conditions under which people utilize the affordances of technologies to lay claim to agency and potentially to power" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 122). The methodology created in this analysis can serve as a template for future study. Nevertheless, it must consider the evolution of memes, their fluidity, and ambiguity (Denisova, 2019).

Notes

1. I Don't Know Her is a meme featuring a clip of an interview with pop singer Mariah Carey where she is asked about singer Jennifer Lopez. Carey's reaction is, "I don't know her." The meme is used when another person is so irrelevant you pretend to not know them when you clearly do (Giphy.com, 2020).

2. Grumpy Cat is a meme featuring a cat with a grumpy or annoyed facial expression. As a meme, it is used to express annoyance or a lack of enjoyment (Know Your Memes, 2020a).

3. The Anti-Joke Chicken meme features an image of a hen accompanied by a top line of text that sounds like the introduction of a joke (e.g., Why did the chicken cross the road?), but the bottom line provides an unexpected anticlimax (Know Your Memes, 2020b).

4. The purpose of the Kony 2012 video was to spread awareness of atrocities committed by Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony in order to create pressure to bring him to justice.

5. Pepper Spray Cop is a photoshop meme based on a photograph of a police officer casually pepper spraying a group of seated protesters at an Occupy Wall Street protest at the University of California, Davis in 2011 (Know Your Memes, 2020c).

6. More specifically, authorization refers to the legitimization by the "authority of traditions, custom and law"; moral evaluation to legitimization by "value systems"; rationalization to legitimization by

"uses of institutional social action and to the knowledge society"; and mythopoesis legitimization is "conveyed through narratives … and cautionary tales" (Ross & Rivers, 2017, p. 5).

7. Media coverage refers here to traditional media, such as radio, newspapers, and television.

8. The authors thank Kerry Ann Cornwall for her research assistance on this project.

9. This was accomplished by searching for other political leaders in Google Images using similar search strings to those used for Trudeau.

10. "And then I/We said" originated in 2011. The caption read "We told them wealth/would 'trickle down'!" and the images features a 1981 Time magazine photo of senior Republicans laughing.

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Know Your Meme, https://knowyourmeme.com/
Meme Generator, https://imgflip.com/memegenerator
New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/
Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/
Rolling Stone, https://www.rollingstone.com/
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