

# Psychological Perspectives on Participatory Culture: Core Motives for the Use of Political Internet Memes

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## Abstract

Political Internet memes significantly contribute to discourse around contemporary events. By studying memes, scholars understand these ‘units of culture’ as forms of participatory content that can fulfill political functions. To explore whether users ascribe memes a political role and consider them an alternative to or supplement of traditional political participation, this study provides a user-centered perspective focusing on core motives of meme use. Via a Delphi method interview approach, participants discuss uses and gratifications of memes in political contexts. A qualitative content analysis provides insight into the role and impact of memes in social movements and everyday politics. The findings show that users perceive memes as a tool for easy, effortless engagement in the public sphere driven by the interplay of self-expression, social identity, and entertainment motives. Participants also discuss potentials and limitations of memes in political contexts, concluding that political memes can only support other efforts. The study contributes to our understanding of memes from a psychological perspective and establishes a basis for further research on deliberative political practices from a user perspective.

## Keywords

Internet memes, political participation, deliberative democracy, participatory culture, user-generated content, uses and gratifications, Delphi method, qualitative content analysis

## Non-Technical Summary

### Background

Social media platforms offer people new ways of engaging with the political sphere. This challenges the traditional understanding of political participation, which dismisses online political discourse as meaningless. However, from previous research we know that people are increasingly engaging in politics through informal, symbolic, creative, participatory, and digitally networked activities. One way this is done is via Internet memes, which remix elements of popular digital culture with current topics and social commentary. To better understand the intersect of political participation and participatory culture, this study looks at the people behind political Internet memes.

### Why was this study done?

This study looks at people who use Internet memes in political contexts. The aim is to uncover reasons why people use political memes, and whether this behavior is related to political participation. The study was done in an exploratory way, meaning the researcher was open to the perspectives of participants without looking for specific answers. This approach was chosen to allow for a new understanding of political participation by exploring participatory culture through the experiences of meme users.



**What did the researchers do and find?**

The researcher conducted interviews with different types of meme users, asking them how they experience memes in social movements and everyday politics. Twenty-five people participated in the study and their responses were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. The analysis revealed why people use memes in political contexts: memes can make political discourse easier to understand, memes can help identify people who hold similar worldviews, and memes can make political content more appealing. Participants also critically reflected on the role that memes play in political contexts, pointing out strengths and weaknesses: the short format of memes was seen as ideal for discourse and as providing a gateway to more serious topics, but cannot offer a thorough overview of a political issue and could be used to manipulate people through superficial and sensationalist statements. Participants suggested that although memes might play a supportive role in political contexts, they could not replace other forms of political participation. Nevertheless, engaging with politics through participatory culture should not be underestimated or undervalued. Online actions can be meaningful and powerful, providing people with new ways to participate in political life.

**What do these findings mean?**

These findings expand our understanding of what it means to be politically engaged. The study situates the use of political Internet memes as a political activity but cautions how memes might impact democratic systems, particularly with regard to misinformation and conspiracy narratives. This raises follow-up questions around how political information spreads online, how political discourse is collectively negotiated, and how unconventional forms of citizenship are experienced. Because this study is one of the first to explore this phenomenon, it cannot answer these questions, but it shows that more research is needed on contemporary political participation and participatory culture.

Internet memes are defined as "artifacts of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 6). Using memes—or participating in digital culture—means that users engage with and collectively negotiate cultural elements that make up our digital social world. *Use* can refer to all forms of engagement: passive meme consumption, active meme production, or engaging with content in other ways, by commenting, sharing, or interacting with other users.

Wiggins and Bowers describe three categories as belonging to the genre of Internet memes: spreadable media, emergent memes, and memes. Spreadable media are pieces of media in their raw state that can be shared online, for example a Tweet, a clip from a movie, or a soundbite on TikTok. If spreadable media are altered, remixed, or parodied by enough individuals, they can be understood to be emergent memes. Emergent memes that produce iterations to the point of fully permeating a population are defined as memes. Where the line is drawn between the three categories is a matter of context and definition—for example, whether a meme has fully permeated a population depends on which online communities we examine and how we specify the respective population.

With this working definition of a meme as a digital media artifact of participatory culture, much of the collective discourse taking place on social media is inherently memetic. The mixing of political and personal, of media consumption and content production, of public discourse and cultural negotiation, represents a key phenomenon in how people today relate to the public realm. Memetic discourse raises myriad questions around users and uses: Why do people engage with memes? What are functions of memes in public discourse? How are users affected by memes? To answer these questions, memes must be examined from various disciplinary lenses.

Scholars from communications and media sciences have conducted content analyses of memes that allow us to infer their political functions. Shifman (2014, pp. 122–123) defines three functions of political memes: (1) memes as forms of persuasion or political advocacy, (2) memes as grassroots action, and (3) memes as modes of expression and public discussion. These functions offer insight into the political space which memes can occupy but leave open how users relate to memes. A systematic analysis of motives for users to engage with memes is outstanding, which is particularly pertinent for content that is rapidly re-appropriated across different contexts: a meme that started out as apolitical may become political in a different context or may be perceived as political by some users but not by others. And, like most forms of user-generated content, memes mix complex sociopolitical issues with elements of humor and popular culture (Highfield, 2016; Plevriti, 2013; Shifman, 2007), making it difficult to delineate it as political or non-political content. And

while scholars might observe a meme as fulfilling a political function, this neither indicates whether a creator intended it to be political, nor whether another user will perceive it as political.

This study aims to provide a fundamental understanding of meme use by assessing the motives for users to seek out memes and the role users ascribe them in political contexts. This is all the more urgent given the recent emergence of questions around the potential dangers of memes in spreading misinformation, promoting emotion-laden rather than fact-based discourse, and fostering conspiracy myths (Bebić & Volarevic, 2018; Buts, 2020; de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, & Literat, 2021).

## Internet Memes and Politics

Since its inception, the Internet has spurred curiosity and suspicion about its role in the political landscape. Initially, many scholars held the Internet responsible for the poor health of democracies, deeming low political engagement and rising political apathy to be symptoms of a disinterested youth looking only to be entertained (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 159). Particularly political online discourse has oftentimes been dismissed as pointless, with some arguing that its ephemeral nature fosters slacktivism—the notion that shallow, feel-good activities reduce an individual's effort for meaningful political action (Hindman, 2009; Rotman et al., 2011). Though we know that citizens today increasingly engage in politics through informal, symbolic, creative, participatory, and digitally networked activities (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018), such activities are often not equated with traditional political activities.

Over the years, theories about the negative effects of the Internet have not held up to empirical scrutiny and studies revealed the complexities underlying the relationship of new media and politics. Today, most scholars agree that social media allow users to participate in politics more easily (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014). Since social media typically circumvent gatekeeping mechanisms of traditional media, they are especially pertinent for activist networks, evident in protest movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, or the Gezi Park movement, where social media played a key role in networking protesters and giving them a voice (Castells, 2012, p. 221; Odağ, Uluğ, & Solak, 2016; Rane & Salem, 2012). The Occupy movement was also one of the first instances in which the explicit political potential of memes became clear. Meme research hence tends to emphasize the role of memes in social movements. For example, Milner (2013b) writes that protesters who use memes during the Occupy movement do so to participate in political discourse, with memes playing a crucial role in shifting the national (US-American) discussion during the 2011 protests. Hristova (2014) in her study of memes during the Occupy movement also examines the relationship between online and offline political action, showing that protesters formed a “meme movement”, relying on memes for “outreach and definition” (p. 275). Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 747) find that memes serve as “collective action frames” to express political claims in social movements. Shifman (2014, p. 129) adds, “memes allow citizens to participate in public, collective actions, while maintaining their sense of individuality.”

These studies demonstrate the relevance of memes for political activism and highlight the political role protesters attribute to memes. Memes in social movements can serve as individuals' collective mouthpiece and, furthermore, influence the way a movement is taken up by political actors and news media, playing to both collective and individual dynamics. Plevriti (2013), one of the only authors to date to examine motives for Internet meme use, finds that self-expression is the primary reason for meme creation—users feel they can raise awareness for causes important to them, and they create and share memes to promote discussion on these topics. Further, she finds that using memes is also motivated by a sense of identity, community-building, and solidarity because memes exist as part of a communally curated media repertoire.

Beyond times of crisis or unrest, memes evolve more haphazardly in the everyday interactions of social media users. For example, in early 2018 a parody rendition of the music video Satisfaction, uploaded by a group of Russian cadets, caused a nationwide stir. Due to its homoerotic content, it quickly attracted censorship attempts from the Russian regime. Out of solidarity for the creators, a wide array of social groups, among them medical students, pensioners, emergency service workers, sports club members, and nurses, began creating and spreading remakes of the video (Gessen, 2018). What on part of the cadets began as a joke, quickly turned into a meme movement protesting homophobia and government censorship. Memes thus also frequently appear spontaneously and can randomly turn from playful to political.

Despite the fascination with memes as a social phenomenon and emergent research topic, there is no consensus on why they are used in political contexts, whether they can be understood as a form of political activity, and how they impact the political sphere. Highfield (2016, p. 86) argues that memes, like much of social media content, provide ongoing commentary and allow users to make sense of unfolding political events. Ross and Rivers (2018, p. 3) point out that “memes are an organic means through which citizens can respond in almost real time to contemporary political events,” and attribute this to the anonymity inherent in the collaborative process of meme creation and dissemination. Wiggins and Bowers (2015, p. 6) suggest that memes are created “for the purpose of continuing a conversation,” by possessing both cultural and social attributes that “reconstitute the social system.”

Current meme research provides insight into various functions of memes, but a comprehensive analysis of users’ motives, especially in sociopolitical contexts, is outstanding.

## Uses and Gratifications of User-Generated Content

Uses and Gratifications Theory supposes an active audience that purposefully seeks out media to fulfill specific needs and obtain gratifications (Leung, 2009). These sought and obtained gratifications, together with past media experience, motivate the continued use of media (Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985). Although gratifications obtained are good predictors of ritualized media use, gratifications sought correspond more closely to motives users are aware of when seeking out media content and therefore primarily pertain to self-reported motives for media use (Leung, 2013; for intentionality and involvement of audiences, see also Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Research on traditional media has thoroughly explored uses and gratifications sought and gained from consuming media (see Blumler, 1979; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Rubin, 2009). In recent years, the framework has expanded to new media and found that information and entertainment remain two of the main motives for users to consume and engage with content (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Information-seeking allows users to learn more about themselves, their peers, and the world they live in. Entertainment provides users with relaxation, enjoyment, mood management, escapism from their daily lives, and emotional release (Shao, 2009).

With the interactive nature of social media platforms, Uses and Gratifications Theory today also encompasses motives for producing content. Producing content is most often associated with self-expression: user-generated content affords users the opportunity to talk back and define their own voice (Meyers, 2012). Users can share personal experiences and opinions, enhancing psychological empowerment through self-efficacy and perceived competence (Leung, 2009). Producing content may also be identity-forming, in that users can construct a self-image, gain recognition, and uphold their reputation among peers (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Shao, 2009). Additionally, self-evaluative incentives may be a way for users to experience satisfaction when meeting desired standards; the high reactivity of social media platforms incentivizes users to create content others will be likely to engage with (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Joyce & Kraut, 2006).

Uses and gratifications for participating with content in other ways (e.g., rating content, commenting on content) have also been studied. Leung (2013) finds that social and affection needs, venting negative feelings, recognition, and entertainment can be satisfied by generating and interacting with content. Shao (2009) states that interacting with other users directly (i.e., user-to-user interaction) or indirectly (i.e., user-to-content interaction) fulfills social needs and contributes to the formation of online communities.

For the general use of social media, social functions of social network sites play a prominent role. Users engage with social media to promote themselves, disclose feelings, raise self-esteem, receive social support, and interact with others (Baams, Jonas, Utz, Bos, & van der Vuurst, 2011; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). Shao (2009) argues that although they are analytically separated, behaviors surrounding user-generated content are closely related and better understood as degrees of involvement. The uses and gratifications found for separate behaviors can also apply to other degrees of involvement: For example, although social needs primarily play a role for users who engage with content or users, consuming content can also relate to belongingness and social support (Baams et al., 2011). Similarly, other studies find that information-seeking is a personalized and participatory activity: Users are not just motivated by the perceived quality of information but also by the informational utility of sharing information with others (Bobkowski, 2015). Katz

et al. (1973) define this as the social utility of news (see also McLeod & Becker, 1981; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2017).

The uses and gratifications framework identifies a wide spectrum of motives that drive the range of social media behaviors and provides a starting point from which to examine new media formats and surrounding motives.

## Political Humor and Infotainment

As limited research is available on memes in political contexts, we turn to a related genre of political content: Infotainment or soft news encompass a variety of political late-night comedy programs driven by entertainment goals first and political information goals second (Caufield, 2008). While memes are generated by individual users and negotiated collectively, infotainment programs are found in broadcast media with traditional gatekeeping mechanisms in place. But like memes, late-night shows offer political commentary and use humor to criticize, mock, and expose political events, issues, and persons. Both fulfill a similar function within the political landscape: Shifman (2014) describes memetic responses as “bottom-up, digital incarnations of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s agendas in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*” (p. 143). Memes may therefore be understood as a continuation of traditional political commentary that today allows wider participation through online communities.

Because soft news imitates traditional news, research has focused on how political comedy programs affect audiences. Viewers are found to be more politically knowledgeable than non-viewers (Baum, 2003; Young, 2004), a relationship which is particularly strong for younger cohorts (Cao, 2008; Hollander, 2005) as well as for those with low levels of political knowledge (Brewer & Cao, 2008; Cao, 2008, 2010). Infotainment is therefore typically understood as a gateway for hard-to-reach audiences (Feldman & Young, 2008; Xenos & Becker, 2009). The political humor invoked in soft news is also believed to incite viewers to further inform themselves on political topics: those who view late-night comedy also consume more traditional forms of news (Young & Tisinger, 2006).

Mixed results have been found for different programs. Feldman (2013) proposes that this is determined not by the content itself but by the way audiences approach content. She finds that viewers who orient to content as news or as a mix of news and entertainment, invest more mental effort, thereby learning more than viewers who perceive the same content as solely entertaining. These findings are supported by other studies, which find that fictional or entertaining content elicit a more elaborate form of cognitive processing (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Kim & Vishak, 2008; LaMarre & Grill, 2019; LaMarre, Landreville, Young, & Gilkerson, 2014). Thus, when individuals consume political entertainment media with the desire for deeper meaning, they process information more thoroughly and are more receptive to media effects. A user-centered perspective therefore allows us to better understand how ‘soft’ political content affects users.

In relation to memes, research to date has only examined the explicitly political and deliberate use of memes and found a relationship to political functions of memes (see Shifman, 2014). Whether the casual use of memes in more everyday contexts can also be understood as political behavior, depends on the political intent of users. Since a political behavior can only be classified as such when an individual intends it to be political (see Fitzgerald, 2013; Fox, 2014), exploring motives for meme use from a user-centered perspective contributes to our understanding of contemporary political participation.

## Overview of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore motives behind the use of memes, and the role users ascribe memes in political contexts. Drawing on findings from social media and infotainment research, this study examines the uses and gratifications individuals seek when using memes. In addition, users are asked to discuss the role and impact they attribute to memes in various political contexts. By learning why users choose to engage with memes—whether they perceive them simply as entertainment or as a viable form of political engagement—we can explore their societal impact.



## Method

### Participants

Data collection for this study consisted of two parts that were conducted in the fall of 2014 and spring of 2015.

Most memes have been studied in the context of social movements, assuming a conscientious, active seeking-out of memes that serves an explicitly political function (see Shifman, 2014). Even when memes are used in everyday political contexts, users may have a deliberate (political) agenda for turning to memes. To understand the full spectrum of motives, it is important to examine various contexts in which memes appear, including casual forms of political talk. This necessitates including users with varying degrees of involvement (Shao, 2009) and who orient to media content differently (Feldman, 2013). This study therefore includes two types of user groups: deliberate and casual meme users.

The group of deliberate users ( $n = 9$ ) participated in a three-part Delphi study. They reported to seek out memes actively and regularly for political purposes, and to not only consume but also create memes. The participants came from four countries: Germany (three males), the United States (one female, one male), Iceland (one female, one male), and Turkey (one female, one male). Participants from Germany and the United States reported using memes in everyday political contexts; participants from Turkey and Iceland reported having created memes as part of their personal activism in social movements in their respective countries—the Gezi Park Protests and Pots and Pans Revolution.

The group of casual users ( $n = 16$ ) participated in an abridged version of the interview guide. They were undergraduate students (twelve female, four male) from an international university in Germany that were familiar with memes and encountered them on social media, though reported not actively seeking them out.

To include a wide variety of user experiences, participants with different cultural backgrounds were chosen. All participants were fluent in English; all interviews were conducted in English.

### Procedure

The Delphi-method is a powerful tool for obtaining a consensus opinion of a group of experts and allowed a control of opinion feedback by providing questionnaires to each participant individually (Landeta, 2006).

The nine deliberate meme users were emailed open-ended questions and asked to record their written responses. The interview guide drew on uses and gratifications of user-generated content to create the first round of interview questions. Since limited academic literature on the use of memes exists, the guide drew on participants' responses to delve deeper into topics that arose during the discussion. Participants identified motives for using memes and discussed characteristics that make memes fit or unfit for political contexts. Participants examined these with respect to the impact on specific social movements and on everyday political issues in their respective countries. Data were collected until answers became repetitive and met the saturation criterion.

Participants of the student sample were first given time to individually fill out open-ended questions in a paper-and-pen questionnaire, then grouped into teams of four, asked to discuss, and record a group answer for each question. The questionnaire was based on the original interview guide and included all major themes.

The interview guide not only asked participants to report on their own experiences, but also provide estimations about how others use memes. This was done to reduce self-reporting bias (e.g., a politically interested person might not characterize their own behavior as slacktivism but might describe others' behaviors as such) and offer participants the chance to share observations of niche online communities. To illustrate this distinction, the reported findings use the term “participant” when a participant is recounting their own experience, or “users” when a participant is describing others.

### Analysis

The written responses of all participants were analyzed in MAXQDA using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012), reducing the data and focusing the analysis on the research question.

No systematic differences were found between the groups; overall, the findings were congruent. The subsample of deliberate meme users provided richer accounts of why they found memes impactful, but also more explicitly pointed

out limitations of memes in political contexts. Furthermore, participants noted that different ways of using memes related to different motives. Where possible, this terminology was adopted (e.g., “sharers” refers to individuals who share memes).

The analysis revealed three main themes that serve as the basis for the dimensions of the coding frame (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). All categories were based on inductive themes that emerged from the data. For the purpose of analyzing the data and reporting the results, each category is presented separately, yet in the experience of participants they are closely related.

The final coding book comprises a total of 390 codes. An independent coder analyzed excerpts of the data, a minimum of 10% per category, yielding an inter-rater agreement of 95%.

## Results

### Dimension 1: Motives for the Use of Memes

Of the motives identified and discussed by participants, three stand out as core motives for the use of memes: self-expression, social identity, and entertainment (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Motives for the Use of Memes*

Category	Description	Comment/Example
Self-expression	The motivation to use a meme is described as the desire to express oneself, share opinions, thoughts, ideas, perspectives, or experiences, take a stand, reveal a position, create a political statement, show consent/dissent, comment on cultural norms, tell stories, spread information, or express sentiments/emotions.	Particularly relevant for users creating and sharing memes. “Using memes is basically telling other people what you think and the way you think.”
Social identity	The motivation to use a meme is described as wanting to identify with others. Participants experience a sense of relatedness through shared beliefs, experiences, norms, and cultural elements. The content or semantics of memes can create this feeling of relatedness.	“Using memes strengthens identities and makes bonds to a certain community online”
Entertainment	The motivation to use a meme is related to entertainment, fun, laughter, and enjoyment. Humor plays an important role, especially in downplaying more serious content and safeguarding against criticism.	Users creating and sharing memes want to entertain; users consuming memes want to be entertained.

### Self-Expression

Participants named self-expression as a key motive, particularly for producing or sharing memes. Users share memes to show others something about what they believe: “Sharing memes is about wanting to transport a message.”

Not only were memes used as a private act of expression, but as a public statement: “The meme can be your personal instrument of political expression, creating a parallel to the caricature as a means for political expression in the 19th and 20th century.” Participants reported that memes could be used to present a point of view to a larger audience, to spread information, raise awareness, and encourage others to act:

Sharers want to attract the attention of friends in their networks. All have a social motivation in common where political memes are concerned: they want to inform about a deficit, criticize and in the end change it by drawing the public attention to it.

Regarding political memes, participants noted that users must be compelled enough by a meme to “put their face on it,” an act which creates vulnerability, particularly on social media where they may be challenged on controversial political topics:

Not only do memes address something political or controversial, but they are allowed to address more politically incorrect opinions of people without the creator to be either known or directly assaulted because of their opinions. The political incorrectness of some memes may be the reason why they become so popular. They are confronting something in society in a passive aggressive manner, perhaps with a cute picture of a polar bear or a penguin, which gives the meme a strange juxtaposition.

To participants, memes constitute a tool for political self-expression that enables beliefs to be broadcast in a safe and effective manner.

### **Social Identity**

The second core motive cited for using memes was social identity. Because memes are used to express opinions, values, and emotions, they create a feeling of relatedness and belonging among users. Engaging with memes can create a common understanding of a concept or situation, linking together like-minded people and fostering a sense of community:

The sense of shared identity that I experience from memes is mostly related to political or social issues. When I see a friend share a meme that I agree with it provides a chance for us to bond over (presumed) values.

Accordingly, users easily identify with others who share content in line with their opinions and may accept opposing opinions of other users through a sense of connectedness:

It might make the adaption to new ideas or values easier as they already have some shared values or identity with that group, so when someone within that identity group is sharing values which contrast the value set of an individual, the individual might be more ready to accept it or tolerate it as they have some shared identities and values to the group in general.

Participants also described cultural identity to play a role: because memes employ elements of popular culture, many come to serve as a “cultural touchstone or reference point,” a sort of community emblem. This can bring people together, but also create boundaries toward members of an out-group. One participant described how memes helped them decide whether a person could be dated based on whether they knew a specific meme. Another participant:

Memes are like a language. They have their own grammar you have to learn. I guess one of the prime examples for this is the doge meme which—literally—has its own grammar. If you are able to speak a (rare) language, you identify with other speakers of that tongue. In my opinion this hold true for memes-as-a-language as well.

Additionally, participants reported that using memes creates a sense of superiority toward members of the out-group if a joke takes effort to be encrypted or is not accessible to all: “These memes typically proclaim something that positions the person as more of a knower than their political opponents and as a better person (e.g., a patriot, or someone who really understands ObamaCare).”

To participants, memes contribute to a sense of identity and relatedness among users, and a sense of exclusivity and superiority towards outsiders.

### **Entertainment**

The discussions also focused on humor as an essential characteristic of memes, and entertainment as a core motive. Participants described users who consume memes as looking for a laugh: “The motivation is usually to get instant laughter, fun, and enjoyment. I reckon there are some endorphin-related feelings when successfully finding a happy



meme that makes one laugh.” Similarly, users who create or share memes were described as wanting to make others laugh.

Regarding political contexts, participants noted that humor could bring people to interact with serious topics in a light-hearted way: “Memes are usually fun to consume and give you comic relief on serious subjects. This is something normal news articles often fail at.” Another participant stated, “An Internet meme says much in a few words [...] the overload of political news and propaganda makes people tired, but this spur of ridicule or laughter makes the experience enjoyable.”

Participants felt that humor could be used to make political content more attractive to those looking for “quick amusement.” Humor could also be used to downplay an aggressive political point of view. This might be done to counteract the vulnerability experienced when sharing a controversial meme: “If the meme is political and funny at the same time, it is more difficult to attack you on a controversial political issue.”

Participants described the entertainment motive as playing a crucial role in attracting people to political topics via memes.

## Dimension 2: Potential of Political Memes

To gauge the perceived influence of memes, the interview guide asked whether memes were a powerful and effective political tool. During the discussion, three aspects of the potential of political memes emerged: characteristics that make memes fit for political contexts (strengths), the impact of memes on societies (societal impact), and the impact of memes on individuals (individual impact) (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Potential of Political Memes*

Category	Description	Comment/Example
Strengths	Participants describe characteristics of memes that make them ideal for political contexts.	e.g., require little effort, concise, accessible, relatable, large reach, visible, appealing, fun, fast
Societal impact	Memes are described as able to impact societies. Participants describe memes as powerful in bringing people together, reflecting the concerns of the masses, and supporting social change.	“Memes can have the power to raise attention on certain social, economic, political issues in the broader public.”
Individual impact	Memes are described as able to impact individuals. Participants describe memes as changing people’s thinking, and possibly motivating them to take further action.	“Memes can influence people’s attitudes or beliefs.”

### Strengths

Participants described memes as effortless, timely, brief, and accessible, and went on to explain how this contributes to their influence:

Memes perfectly fit into the consumption patterns of today’s media. In small moments of ubiquitous procrastination there is no time to read that whole article on The Guardian. However, there is enough time to get the key message of that specific meme.

Another participant described memes as the “fast food of the Internet,” offering instant gratification to users. All agreed that memes represent ideas in a way that requires little effort; they can be created quickly and without much work, shared and curated on virtually all platforms, and remixed with other content to remain pervasive. “I think any way of delivering an idea, message or a joke that is brief, to the point and understandable by everyone has a certain power.”

This category captures how specific characteristics of memes makes them an ideal medium to deliver a message, create awareness around societal issues, and shape public discourse.

### Societal Impact

Participants linked memes to societal impact by explaining how they reflect the views of the masses. In their view, memes hold the proverbial mirror up to society by criticizing and mocking events and issues: “I think that memes present the perspective of society toward social events and responsible parties.”

The power of memes was seen to lie in them as the voice of the people, as an element of grassroots democracy: “I have never seen a meme created by the government. So basically, the power is held by society over the government.” Although astroturfed<sup>1</sup> and commercialized memes were touched upon, overall participants described memes as a phenomenon of the masses, a powerful political tool for ordinary citizens:

Nobody who has seriously studied political upheavals in the West for the past two hundred years or so can dismiss the impact of posters and pamphlets. It would be naïve at best to think that the hundreds of thousands of participants in the November revolution arrived at their position through painstaking research and reading through essays and books. No; simple slogans that resonated with their experiences are almost certainly what bonded the mutineers in Kiel. Memes are unquestionably related to such factors; the popularity of political posters from the Golden Age of the art form as bases for meme images is *prima facie* evidence of the connection, however satirical the intent.

As such, participants understood memes as a tool for enhancing protest and provoking social change. Asked whether they believe memes to effectuate real-world change, it was noted that “online happenings are a part of real life. I don’t think that sharing memes and interacting online are an illusionary means of exerting influence.” Another participant added, “online activism and memes ended up in the downfall of one of our ministers<sup>2</sup>. I think this is pretty real.”

Participants characterized memes as an effective way for individuals to impact societies by shaping public discourse, setting agendas, and contributing to the spread of information.

### Individual Impact

When participants addressed the impact memes could have on individuals, the discussion centered on shaping people’s way of thinking. “Whether in picture form or text, memes structure thinking; they can serve as mental categories, whether for people or for behaviors.” Memes were described as convincing people to take on different perspectives and rethink an already formed position: “I do believe that one can learn something from interacting with memes. They can change your point of view and make you rethink your own position, as well as think about the topic of the meme.”

Participants also suggested that memes may incite further action: “If memes are short and concise, the reader connects them with this topic and is motivated to inform themselves more about the topic or to get involved in the solution of the problem.”

Participants believe that memes influence the thoughts, opinions, and attitudes of users, and create more interest in a topic. Some also speculated that this could contribute to behavioral changes by spurring political engagement online and offline.

## Dimension 3: Limitations of Political Memes

While participants stated that memes could impact societies and individuals, they qualified these statements by noting the limitations of memes (see [Table 3](#)).

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1) Astroturfed content is generated by a group or organization, but it is made to look as though it is authentically user-generated to create the impression of widespread grassroots support.

2) This refers to the Guttenberg plagiarism scandal in Germany.

**Table 3***Limitations of Political Memes*

Category	Description	Comment/Example
Weaknesses	Memes are attributed characteristics that participants believe make them ill fit for political contexts. They see these characteristics as shortcomings or disadvantages of political memes.	e.g., superficial, manipulative, oversimplifying, not verifiable, propaganda
Slacktivism	Memes are described as unable to have a meaningful impact on society or individuals, possibly even deterring meme users from taking political action.	“Meme use is a quite superficial action, not doing anything about the real problem.”

**Weaknesses**

Participants described memes as superficial, manipulative, and oversimplifying the truth: “It is amazing how people will eagerly share a meme that has very little text or depth but is catchy.” Many noted that memes cater to the masses, who search for simple answers and easy solutions: “I guess political memes serve many people’s search for simplification and simple and concise answers to complex questions. Somehow the same reason why caricatures or even conspiracy theories are popular.”

Participants touched upon the fact that memes can “manipulate” users because the content is not easily verified, and misinformation can be spread through oversimplified statements:

Every time something is shortened, concise, exaggerated and somehow humorous there is a risk of manipulation, especially in the media. That is because the truth is complex and not as easy as it could be presented in a meme.

Participants agreed that memes are too simplistic to adequately capture complex sociopolitical issues.

**Slacktivism**

During the discussion on the political impact of memes, the interview guide introduced the concept of slacktivism, providing participants with a definition and asking them to discuss whether they believe memes inhibit or foster political engagement. Some participants felt slacktivism could be problematic when people do not translate political talk into other action. One participant noted that the highly reactive environment of user-generated content might be enough to produce a sense of agency:

There is a sense of satisfaction that comes from seeing others view and share your work, it validates your effort and the sentiment you think is important to express. I think there is also something inherently agentic in the act of creation, even in creating something as simple as a meme. You are constructing something that is treated as valuable by some people, this is bound to provide some sense of satisfaction.

However, instead of seeing memes as replacing political action, participants suggested they go together with other activities. For example, memes could be the online counterpart to an offline protest: “I think clicktivism supports the concrete [offline] effort. Sometimes the news, the event, etc. spread faster with online actions.”

Overall, memes were described as supporting political participation and social movements: “Memes do not substitute other political activity. They can function as the glue for an otherwise active movement, or as the catalyst for the formation of a movement, but they cannot take the place of a movement.”

## Discussion

The study identified three core motives that drive the use of memes: self-expression, social identity, and entertainment. Participants further reported on the political impact of memes, but also critically reflected on their limited scope as a full-fledged form of political engagement.

Based on reports from participants, meme consumers are first and foremost drawn to memes for entertainment. Two aspects make the entertainment motive relevant for the political context. First, memes present content in an enjoyable way and thereby introduce users primarily interested in entertainment to more serious topics. Particularly for those who struggle to engage with serious topics, humor can provide relief and make political content more pleasurable. Like infotainment, memes may thereby provide a gateway to political topics, particularly for hard-to-reach audiences (see Cao, 2008). This supports Shifman's (2014) stance that political memes are conceptually like infotainment, offering easy access to light-hearted political content. Further, participants reported that humorous political memes could incentivize users to deepen their political knowledge. Memes are not searched out primarily to learn about politics, but to learn "what the Internet is talking about." Users search out additional information when they feel it is relevant to a great number of people. Political memes hereby fulfill the social utility of news (see Katz et al., 1973; McLeod & Becker, 1981; Yamamoto et al., 2017): gaining or deepening political knowledge happens as a side effect to the consumption of entertaining memes. It may be a promising avenue for meme research to draw also on the audience effects of infotainment to explore possible effects of political memes.

The second motive for users to search out political memes is the wish for creators to express themselves. This goes in line with previous findings, which identified self-expression as a primary reason why users produce and share content (see Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Leung, 2009; Meyers, 2012; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Participants in this study reported that because memes are quick and effortless to create and share, they are an accessible way for users to express views, values, and experiences. Political memes can satisfy an individual's wish to contribute to a topical political debate by making involvement with politics easier than conventional, resource-intensive forms of political engagement. The memetic format thus provides a low-barrier entry to political topics. Follow-up research is required to study whether memes also create pathways to deeper political engagement.

Finally, participants noted that political memes are situated in highly social contexts and remarked that this heavily motivates the use of memes. They described how high reactivity of social news websites enhances user experiences by creating social identities. Research on social media has always highlighted the need of users to interact with and connect to others, to self-present and receive recognition for doing so (Baams et al., 2011; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Utz et al., 2012). The participants of this study likewise reported that political memes provide identification with users who hold similar worldviews. These accounts are in line with literature on Social Identity Theory whereby individuals derive a sense of social identity from membership in a relevant social group. Behavior on part of the individual is guided by this identity as individuals strive to conform to the norms of the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The recurring elements of memes may hereby function as a meme language and provide common ground for users from various backgrounds (see also Hartley, 2010; Leavitt, 2014). Milner (2013a) describes these elements as "vernacular fixity" (p. 2) and proposes that this prepatterning "affords depth and expression" (p. 3) as memes function as a lingua franca. He posits that this "common language" allows users to "have discussions spanning vast geography" (Milner, 2013a, p. 5). Accordingly, participants of this study proposed that meme users are more likely to be swayed by an opposing view based on shared experiences. Perhaps, identity motives can support users' political aspirations by providing a community of like-minded individuals in which users are more trusting and can more easily engage in meaningful political debate. This may be a promising avenue to the study of echo chamber effects in online communities.

The core motives derived from the qualitative content analysis can be treated as standalone. However, motives to engage with user-generated content tend to be intertwined. First, the desire for users to self-express can work in tandem with the entertainment motive: it was described that users believe they are less vulnerable to criticism when they express a political opinion through an entertaining meme. Humor, in addition to attracting people who look at memes, may also safeguard creators of memes who wish to share a political opinion. Second, the 'social utility of memes as news' might work by way of users wanting to understand what makes a joke enjoyable to others: users can be incentivized to seek out more information on an issue when a humorous meme is viral. In this instance, the

entertainment and identity motives converge to enhance political learning. Finally, users searching for identity are described as provided with a safe environment, encouraging more profound political debate and enhance their wish to self-express. The perception of a shared experience with other users could be supported by the entertainment function: humor can play a prominent role in relationship formation and maintenance because a shared sense of humor increases perceived similarity (Utz, 2015). In conclusion, political memes seem to provide users with an accessible, safe, and playful way of expressing political opinions. These motives do not compete with a desire for political engagement; instead, they seem to support further political aspirations.

To turn to the impact of political memes: Participants felt memes lend themselves well to political contexts. Their short slogans, easy access, wide audiences, and flexible areas of application make them an optimal tool for raising awareness about a topic. At the same time, memes cannot offer a comprehensive overview of a political issue, with memes characterized as propaganda tools that can easily manipulate users through superficial and sensationalist statements.

Memes were also described as excluding those not privy to memetic formats and popular digital culture. This exclusivity of meme communities may strengthen the bonds of group members and keep outsiders out, going in line with a structural analysis of memes by Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017), which describes the subcultural knowledge around memes as a gatekeeping practice. Memes, although technically accessible to everyone, practically exclude those who are not well-versed in memes. Participants found this to be a central aspect of meme culture and were thus hesitant in describing memes as a democratic tool for all.

Overall, participants critically reflected on their use of memes and provided a nuanced perspective on memes in political contexts. It was suggested that while memes might play a supportive role, this does not constitute meaningful political engagement and cannot take the place of other forms of political participation. However, participants also pointed out that new forms of political participation should not be underestimated or undervalued. Online actions themselves can be meaningful and powerful, providing users with new ways to exert influence on the political sphere.

## Limitations

This study relies on self-report measures which are subject to an array of cognitive biases; participants of this study may not be aware of all motives around meme use. And although care was taken to minimize social desirability bias, participants could also have easily omitted unfavorable information about themselves. For this reason, self-presentation, reputation, and impression management may not have featured as prominent motives for the use of memes, despite having previously been found for other types of user-generated content (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Utz et al., 2012).

A further limitation stems from the nature of the sample. Included were individuals who deliberately seek out memes in social movements as well as everyday political contexts, individuals who casually encounter memes online, and users of different nationalities. Despite the variety, these participants do not reflect the experiences of all users. Specifically, memes for democratic subversion may provide different political uses in authoritarian regimes (see for example Soh, 2020). This study does not claim generalizability but proposes future research to further investigate political user-generated content.

## Conclusion

This study finds that the use of Internet memes is motivated by self-expression, entertainment, and social identity, as well as their interplay. It situates the use of political memes as a political act but cautions of the role and impact of memes for democratic systems, particularly with regard to exclusionary practices, oversimplification, and misinformation.

Not all questions around political memes, their uses and users have been answered. Understanding how individuals orient to political content is crucial to understanding our contemporary digital landscape. Further research must illuminate these issues from different disciplinary and methodological lenses, adding to our understanding of mediated public spaces, collectively negotiated discourse, and unconventional forms of citizenship. Including users in this endeavor, from both a practical and academic perspective, can only enrich the study of spreadable media, citizens, and participatory culture.

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