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A(meme)rican Politics: Gender Representation in Political Memes of the 2016 Election

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Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

A(meme)rican Politics: Gender Representation in Political Memes of the 2016 Election

by

Taylor C. Lincoln

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in a partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree in

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School of Communication

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Abstract

Utilizing the lens of feminist theory, this research examines gender representation in the political memes of the 2016 Presidential election in the United States. Using a mixed-methods approach, I first examine the use of the #election2016 on Twitter ($N = 2,108$) through a network analysis to understand the driving actors of discourse surrounding the election. A textual analysis was used to examine the views and opinions through the vocabulary and terms utilized within that network. Finally, a content analysis was conducted to interpret the latent messages and representations of gender within the memes ($n = 100$). Results show that political memes maintain stereotypical gender representation in the discourse and the memes themselves. While a congruency was identified between network's discourses on Twitter and messages of the memes related to the 2016 presidential election, there was no congruency between the visual and textual messages within the memes.

Keywords: political memes, feminist theory, Twitter, content analysis, network analysis

A(meme)rican Politics: Gender Representation in Political Memes of the 2016 Election

What do *Game of Thrones*, Queen, *it's lit*, *Fortnite*, *Gangnam Style*, Ariana Grande's *Thank U, Next* music video all have in common? They are pieces of pop culture that climbed to such a height of popularity, it seemed they were the only thing that mattered in our society at that moment. All of these things are memes. Memes are understood to be "information viruses" (Blackmore, 2000, p. 273). They were first introduced in the 1970s by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who makes the analogy of cultural material to genes; he argued that things like fashion or music evolve and grow at a similar rate as biological genes (Dawkins, 1976). Memes are information viruses because they are ideas or trends that hop from brain to brain by way of imitation and spread like wildfire (Marwick, 2013). They are artifacts that reach a height of popularity within a culture that we as citizens are all participating or engaging with them.

In the 1990s, the study of memetics boomed, coinciding with the boom of the Internet. Memetics provided a perfect foundation for describing the culture of the Internet—allowing ordinary people and things to become overnight sensations (Marwick, 2013). Highly utilized in the fields of marketing and advertising, memes over the Internet spread even more rapidly from person to person through social media. For example, Pepe the Frog, or the still image of Gene Wilder smiling, from his performance as Willy Wonka in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1972) are popular visuals used for memes to make reference to things happening in our culture (see Figure 1). Shifman (2014) describes the three types of memes that exist in today's culture: viral videos, memetic videos, and memetic photos. My research will focus on the latter - memetic photos, henceforth referred to as Internet memes.

Over the last decade, Internet memes have gained popularity within politics. They have become powerful agents in shaping public opinion on political issues (Carter, 2016). Internet

memes are user-generated content that allows the audience to create and uphold beliefs about political issues (Huntington, 2017; Polách, 2015). They make arguments or statements about government policy, a social issue, or a politician and provide the viewer an opportunity to create their own opinions and engage in discourse. Although we as viewers have agency in creating our own beliefs, the subtext of the memes we view has the potential to perpetuate certain representations or assumptions that can be used as foundations for our opinions. Particularly, Internet memes have the power to perpetuate certain assumptions about gender in their latent, or underlying, content.

Politics are rooted in patriarchy, but women are spearheading into politics thus creating tension and viable content for political memes. While little research has been done on gender stereotypes specifically in political memes, there has been some research on sexism and gender in Internet memes. Drakett, Rickett, Day, and Milnes (2018) investigate the dangers of humor through Internet memes and the impact it has on the power relations of gender. Through memes, there is a "reinforcement of boundaries and stereotypes" (p. 111). The reinforcement of stereotypes taken into the political territory can be problematic for women who are attempting to make headway and be taken seriously in their political roles because the political sphere is historically a male-dominated sphere.

The current research project will examine the gender representations within political memes of the 2016 Presidential election. Using the second wave of feminist theory as a theoretical framework, this study will investigate how political memes represent gender and maintain ideologies and expectations of gender and power. First, a network analysis on Twitter will be conducted to understand the biggest actors driving the discourse using the hashtag #election2016. Textual analysis will be completed to gain an understanding of the popular

vocabulary used during discourse surrounding the election and gender, investigating how gender is represented in the words used in the discourse. Finally, content analysis will be completed to examine how gender is represented in political memes through the visual and textual elements, and what stereotypes may be reinforced through these representations.

Conceptual Definitions

When using the terms meme or Internet memes, I will be referring to memetic photos which Shifman (2014) defines as “photographs that attract extensive volumes of user-created responses, usually in the format of Photoshop-based collages” (p. 89). Shifman (2014) also explains three elements within a meme are a visual (typically a still photo), text surrounding the visual, and humor. Political memes will be defined as memes that include or refer to candidates in the United States’ political sphere. Only political memes depicting Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton will be included in my research because they were the final candidates of the 2016 United States presidential campaign.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory provides a strong framework for this study because of its focus on ending patriarchal domination and oppression and understanding the representation of gender within media (Schippers & Sapp, 2012). Feminist theory strives to understand the interplay of gender and gender power (Cuklanz, 2016). Campbell (1973) argues it challenges the “psychosocial reality of the cultural context” in which the communication occurs; challenging the power issues rooted in the “fabric of our society” and provides a critical lens to examine the role of women in media (p. 199). Feminist theory utilizes a wave approach. This type of approach has “merit when it is used to describe the existence of mass-based feminist movements” (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 58). The wave approach provides an opportunity to narrow in on specific issues of the

movement and compare it to other eras. For the purpose of my research, I will use second wave feminism and the focus on gender representation and its relationship to power, examining if and how representations of women in power has changed from the 1960s. Currently there are three main waves of feminism.

First Wave Feminism

The first wave of feminism began in the late 1800s during the Seneca Falls Convention and this wave focused on opportunities for women – especially suffrage (Rampton, 2018). In 1920, women in the United States gained the right to vote with the passage of the 19th amendment. The first wave of feminism also sought to examine the difference between men and women in the civic sphere.

Second Wave Feminism

The second wave of feminism gained popularity in the 1960s through the 1990s. This wave coincided with anti-war and civil rights movements, therefore, it had a major focus on equality – equality in many spheres, especially in politics and media – and how women were represented within media (Rampton, 2018). Second wave feminism focuses on public discrimination against women and the eradication of gender stereotypes throughout the media (Tully, 2017). Second wave feminism illuminated the underrepresentation of women in mass media – and when women were presented, they were portrayed in roles of submission and did not have an impact in media culture (Cuklanz, 2016). While women have made headway into politics, they are still severely underrepresented in the political sphere because it is historically male-dominated; utilizing second wave feminism is critical to examining gender representation in a male-dominated sphere (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Randall, 2016).

Third Wave Feminism

The third wave of feminism disrupted the constructs developed during the first two waves. It embraces elements that the "mothers of feminism" felt were male oppression – like lipstick, high-heels and proudly showing cleavage (Rampton, 2018). The third wave focuses on women's agency and celebrates intersectionality– they do not want to think of the world as “us-them” – they are focused on inclusion based on race, gender, sexuality, and identity (Mondal, 2018).

Second wave feminism provides the strongest framework for my research with its focus on media representation and the continued fight for equality. While the third wave provides additional considerations for gender representation in media, like an intersectional perspective integrating gender, race, and socioeconomic status, my research seeks only to examine the representations of gender in relation to power; therefore, second-wave feminism provides the strongest foundation. Second wave feminism originated during a time when women began to adopt leadership roles and gain power in male-dominated professions. A main concern of this wave was the portrayal of these female leaders within media. The 2016 election was the first election the United States had a woman as a final primary presidential candidate. Therefore, it is important to utilize the second wave of feminism to assess how representations of women in power, if at all, has changed.

Second wave feminism examines patterns of how gender roles were presented and understanding the implications of those representations. Typically, there was an underrepresentation of women in the mass media and when they were presented, women were shown in subordinate roles based on facial expressions, body positions, and sexual roles (Collins, 2011; Cuklanz, 2016). The current research project investigates patterns of gender representation

within political memes of the 2016 election to examine if they maintain these power ideologies of women in subordinate roles.

Related Studies

Memes as a Communication Tool

Research has shown that memes are artifacts of communication and how they work as an entire field and also as individual entities. Wiggins and Bowers (2015) introduce memes as a genre, in which they define as an activity that guides or alters the dynamics of human culture. Memes as a genre operate within structures to share the culture. Memes also act as pieces of visual rhetoric. They allow audiences to construct the meaning of the messages they send. Huntington (2013) conducted research using the theoretical foundation of visual rhetoric and how the study of memes fits perfectly within that framework. Huntington found that memes utilize signs, language, and symbols to create messages and opinions to add to participatory media culture. The implications from understanding memes as visual rhetoric are identity building, public discourse, and commentary in participatory media.

Memes utilize humor as a strategy to engage their audiences. Laineste and Voolaid (2016) investigate how Internet humor strengthens arguments made regarding social or political issues. Memes are multilayered in their approach to gain a wider audience for topics and messages. The combination of visual and textual arguments in combination with humor makes an impact on audiences. Laineste and Voolaid (2016) conclude the meme users are now more “active and knowledgeable in everyday issues” and this can influence their consumption and opinions – engaging with memes to comment on these problems (p. 44). Humor provides an easy access point to the underlying commentary memes attempt to make.

As pieces of visual rhetoric, memes utilize signs, languages, and symbols to create discourse. Memes shape identities, spread knowledge about social and political issues, allow audiences to create meanings from them and provide a platform for public deliberation. Memes have been shown to disrupt the dominating narrative by turning the attention to ways of acknowledging that identity, relationships, and consumptive practices exist (Carter, 2016). Memes have the ability to shape and articulate new positions about issues, thus adding to and impacting the discourse around social and political topics. They are not just funny pictures shared through social media, they are impactful artifacts that help form beliefs and opinions.

Memes in Political Communication

In political communication, memes serve a key function in spreading and molding opinions and beliefs, making them very popular as a campaign strategy. Bebic and Volvervic (2018) researched the role and significance of memes in political campaigns, resulting in the knowledge that the goal of a meme is to be visible and humorous in order to reach heightened popularity within social media networks. This research is also important to consider for the 2016 election because of the Russian intervention within social media and memes. Content creation from Russian online operators worked to gain popularity and trust of social media users but could create bias and push certain political ideals to the audience (Shane, 2018). Typically, integrating parody or humor provides memes the power to be easily spread throughout social networks, allowing the messages within the memes about the politician and their views to reach a larger audience (Piata, 2016). My research seeks to illuminate that while memes are shared typically because they are funny, there are deeper messages within the opinions and beliefs that need to be investigated.

Memes engage audiences by drawing their attention to certain political issues or political actors. A key strategy of political communication is “culture- jamming” which can be defined as “a user-based re-interpretation of mass culture” (Polach, 2015, p. 202). Polach’s research exemplifies that memes work to culture-jam to reinterpret political actions, performances, and issues through parody and humor to reach that larger audience and discourse. Ross and Rivers (2017) found that memes were used during the 2016 presidential election to focus on the delegitimization of the "candidates’ credentials or suitability for office" (p. 4). While memes in politics enhance discourse and commentary, they also have an impact on audiences' perceptions. Huntington (2017) studied the relationship between political memes, viewer effect, and the viewers' perception of the memes' persuasiveness; finding that if the viewer’s political ideology matched that of the political memes, they rated the memes as more effective in messaging and did not inspect the memes' argument. Memes can be used to reinforce preconceived notions audiences hold and reinforce potential stereotypes within our society.

Social media has gained a larger role in political communication, and memes have followed suit, allowing an opportunity to create an arena for discourse and action about political issues. Ramirez and Church (2019) found that Facebook meme groups were popular and utilized to share grassroots political ideas during the 2016 election. The different pages, for and against candidates, allowed for a forum to share memes, satirical drawings, and commentary about the candidates. Milner (2013) analyzed how memes were utilized in a populist way during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement to create uproar and action for the movement. For example, memes were created with the tagline "we are the 99% percent" paired with satirical commentary on whom the 99% are considered to be (see Figure 2). Other memes were utilized to rally against the 1%, but both sides of this issue utilized memes to create public commentary about the

movement and promote action. Memes have an impactful nature about them, and it is critical to evaluate what messages are shared through these seemingly benign humorous tidbits of digital media.

Gender Representation in Traditional Media

Society has certain expectations or ideas of how men and women are supposed to perform in their daily interactions. Traditional media, like advertisements and television, has worked to “define certain behaviors and values” for men and women through their depictions that seep into everyday interactions, providing guidelines for what is “appropriate and expected” (Johnson, 2004, p. 27). For example, women have been depicted as passive, gentle, easy to manipulate in advertisements throughout time, reinforcing a male-dominated power relationship (Kang, 1997). Lauzen (2008) found similar results in prime-time television - men and women are portrayed in stereotypical gender roles: men as the business owners and breadwinners, and women as homemakers and mothers. When women and men are represented, or behave, outside of these stereotypical roles, they face judgment and scrutiny.

Politics has traditionally been a masculine profession – but with women making advancements into politics, it is important to examine the stance of our society and how seemingly benign artifacts, like memes, can emphasize certain perspectives and make change increasingly difficult. Women representation in politics has been pornified, they “hijack a woman politician’s image or persona to serve sexist, patriarchal, or misogynistic purposes” and maintain power structures we see in gender throughout our society (Anderson, 2011, p. 336). Gender representation within politics maintains the patriarchal framework. Research shows that women tend to be represented and perceived as “compassionate, honest, and emotional” typically in roles of nurturer, caregiver, or in connection to their relationships, and men are portrayed as

more “instrumental...being strong, intelligent and rational” (Oikonomou, 2014, p. 19).

Examining these gender representations within political memes are critical because politics is a male-dominated sphere and positions within are seen as “form[s] of masculinity” (Randall, 2016, p. 1). Second wave feminism worked to break this glass ceiling of politics, earning women executive roles, and allowing women to gain “credibility in the male-normed career” paths; therefore, making it a strong framework for my research to understand gender representation within this male-normed profession (Biklen, 2008, p. 435).

Gender in Memes

Gender is a point of contention, popularly used as the foundation for jokes and satirical commentary in memes. Harlow (2018) investigated the use of sexist and feminist humor of political memes against the Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis. The meta-analysis demonstrates that memes “function as a form of political discourse” and maintain societal and gender power structures (p. 12). Drakett, Rickett, Day, and Milnes (2018) examine the influence of humor in the gender-power relationship, in which they find two themes within memes in their analysis: Technological Privilege of the technologically-skilled masculine identity and Others, where humor is used to construct marginalized groups in a certain way. Their findings acknowledge the masculine identity of the digital space and how that could influence the content shared. If the digital space is male-dominated, the marginalized group is any other gender. A network analysis will be done in my research to understand who is creating the discourse surrounding the election; if it is male-dominated like Milner found in his study, it would provide important context for messages the memes are sending.

Milner (2013) finds a persistence of the Internet as a male space in his investigation of antagonism regarding gender and race. Memes serve as tools that “underscore the social

dynamics” of society and gender stereotypes were unforgivingly represented within memes, reinforcing the typical power structures of gender (p. 64). With that persistence of a male-dominated space, Westfall (2018) makes the argument that memes are pieces of feminist work maintaining critical tenets of feminism like the focus on community building and the ideology that the personal is political. Community building is a central tenet of second-wave feminism, focusing on spreading an autonomy or “sisterhood” between feminist (Campbell, 1973, p. 202). Meme creators had a focus on the “personal is political” – a second wave ideology that focused on increasing the awareness that individual faults or problems were shared between all women (Campbell, 1973, p. 202).

Little research has examined gender in political memes through the lens of feminist theory. However, gender stereotyping within political memes is consistent with the stereotyping seen in other media like advertisements or television. Spencer (2017) employed framing theory to understand how politicians were framed based on skill, policy, character, behavior, gender, and appearance in political memes. Findings show that overall political memes regarding these candidates showed female candidates in a negative light regarding appearance, character, skills, and policies when compared to male candidates. This is consistent with traditional media representation that women in politics are perceived as more negative than their male counterparts. However, Spencer’s research examines gender at the surface level regarding sentiment but does not detail how gender itself is represented through the memes. My research examines specifically how gender is represented and what patterns can be seen throughout political memes.

Memes, while at first glance are funny, should be considered a powerful tool that could have a great impact on viewers. Especially when examining memes within politics, and the

interaction with gender, it is important to consider what underlying messages are put forth by these comical pairings of picture and text. These underlying messages could become problematic when they include stereotypes about the subject within the photos – in this case, gender in the political context.

Congruency

Memes utilize visual and textual elements to create messages and generate discourse about issues; therefore, it is important to have congruency between the messages. When text and images are utilized, congruency can be understood as the idea “that images do not communicate a separate message but only reinforce the text [and] emphasize its salience” (Lochbuehler et al., 2017, p. 266). Congruency can be defined as when “visual and textual features reflect a common theme” and incongruence is when they do not reflect a common theme (p. 266).

Research in advertising has shown that congruency between visual and textual elements is critical in facilitating impression formation for purchase of a product. Congruence “increases processing fluency” allowing consumers to make faster decisions of trust and purchase of products (Van Rompay, De Vries, & Van Venrooij, 2010, p. 22). The understanding of text-image congruence in advertising can be translated into my research to examine the message congruency between textual and visual elements of the political memes. Deciding which candidate to vote for is comparable to impression formation of what products to purchase; therefore, it is important that the representations in media of candidates are congruent in their messaging. The potential congruence or incongruence could impact the salience of the overall message of the meme sent out to audiences; also, impacting the viewer’s trust and support of those candidates. Congruency has been shown to “enhance recall of information” which can be

critical in terms of deciding which product to purchase or which candidate to vote for (Lochbuehler et al., 2017, p. 266).

Research Questions

RQ1: How is gender represented in political memes focused on the 2016 presidential election?

Previous literature shows that women in media are either underrepresented or represented in stereotypical roles (Johnson, 2004; Kang, 1997). Especially in politics, gender has faced immense scrutiny in terms of how it is represented in media (Anderson, 2011; Oikonomou, 2014). This research question seeks to examine if political memes mimic that representation or if there is any type of deviation from previous research findings.

RQ2: Is there congruency between the visual and textual messages in the political memes?

In advertising, congruency between visual and textual messages is crucial in impression building (Van Rompay et al., 2010). The fact that memes utilize visual and textual elements, it is important to examine if congruency exists, particularly in political memes focusing on candidates. If the messages are not congruent, that could have the potential to adversely impact the viewer's perception of the candidates.

RQ3: Is there congruency between terms brought up on Twitter using #election2016 and the terms in political memes?

This research question focuses on how many of the tweets shared using the hashtag #election2016 reflect the messages shared within the memes and identify potential patterns of words and phrases within the network that support gender representations within the memes.

RQ4: Do the memes focus on current issues of the 2016 election or refer to past events?

This research question explores the focus of the memes. For example, in Clinton's case, does the meme focus on her email scandal or does it refer to Bill Clinton and his affair? Referencing to a spouse is in line with stereotypical gender representations, showing women in relationships or in relation to another person (Oikonomou, 2014).

Methodology

This study implemented a mixed methodology, utilizing a three-part analysis, to investigate gender representation within political memes. First, I used a network analysis to examine actors driving the discourse utilizing the hashtag #election2016. Kozinets (2015) defines a network analysis as a methodology that examines "structures and patterns of relationships between and among social actors in a network" (p. 62). According to Milner (2013) the Internet is a male-dominated space, and therefore it is critical to understand who is creating the discourse, and memes within a network. Then, I performed a textual analysis using VoyantTools to understand keywords and phrases shared in that discourse and how those words or phrases may represent gender. Fairclough (2003) defines textual analysis as "linguistic analysis of texts" (p. 3). This analysis provided me with a basic understanding of the discourse and views of the largest actors in the network surrounding the 2016 election and their views on gender and politics.

Finally, I performed a qualitative content analysis to evaluate the representation of gender within the political memes of the 2016 presidential election. Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as a way to examine "the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material...through classification, tabulation and evaluation of its key symbols and themes" (p. 17). Qualitative content analysis maintains the strength of quantitative methodology but allows for a deeper analysis and interpretation of the subject matter (Mayring, 2000). These analyses are

appropriate when using feminist theory because it is a critical interpretive theory; therefore, a mixed-methods approach allows me to investigate nuances of the vocabulary along with textual and visual messages of the memes.

Data Collection

WebDataRA. I performed a basic network analysis to understand who was using the hashtag #election2016 and prominent actors within it; data was collected from Twitter using WebDataRA, a data scraping assistant for research utilizing Twitter developed by Professor Leslie Carr. The assistant updates the feed every 5 seconds on certain keywords and hashtag searches. In order to capture meaningful data to my research project, the advanced search option in Twitter was used. The keywords utilized in this search were #MAGA, #ImWithHer, #LockHerUp and #NeverTrump as well as #memes. These were the most popular hashtags used during the election (Cohen, 2016; Victor, 2016). In order to control for biases, I used one hashtag was in support per each candidate and one was not in support. This data was scraped from September 1st, 2016 to January 31st, 2017 to capture data two months prior to the election, and two months following the election to provide bookends to November, the month of the Presidential election; 2,108 units were collected from Twitter through WebDataRA and uploaded into an Excel file.

Utilizing Excel PivotTable function, I was able to see the Top 10 tweeters who utilized the keywords and hashtags used in my advanced search (see Table 1). To see who the most popular actors were within the data set, I placed Retweets and Author in the Values column, and filtering by the top ten, I was able to see the most active Twitter users. Simple searches on Twitter were used to gain more information about these users to understand where their interests lie and if they were individuals or corporate accounts. The top 10 tweeters consisted of outright

Trump supporters – with only TruthFeedNews being a corporate account. The only investigation done on their profiles was to attempt to determine political and/or corporate affiliations.

I then performed a network analysis through the Gephi software. Gephi is an open source software that allows researchers to perform network analysis and create network visualizations developed by a team lead by Mathieu Bastian. I imported the Edge Table from the data set scraped by WebDataRA to use as my data within Gephi. A whole network analysis allows the data to be seen in terms of “positions that members occupy within a network as well as suggesting very important partitioning of subgroups or ‘cliques’ within the group” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 62). While this type of analysis is atypical for research focusing on content, it allows background context of the authors and interactions of those authors within that shared network, which provided useful information during my content analysis. I had a clearer understanding of who was driving the discourse within that network and the most active contributors. Memes are circulated through social media; therefore, it is important to examine if there are similarities in the messages between network discourse and message in memes across social media platforms.

Within Gephi, the data was sent through algorithms to create a visualization of the network. Using the Force Atlas layout, I created a directed graph to create a visual representation of the network (see Figure 3). Two different tests were run to gain metrics on the network. First, I ran a test for the average path length to provide information on how close nodes, or people, are from one another (Hansen et al., 2010). With this test, we gather metrics important to understanding the connection of the network, providing metrics for different centralities, the centrality of utmost interest is betweenness centrality. This metric provided information on how the “removal of a node would disrupt other connections” within the network (Hansen et al.,

2010, p. 40). The second test run was for modularity to recognize the different communities within the network.

Voyant tools. I completed two textual analyses using VoyantTools. VoyantTools was created by Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell to facilitate interpretive practices through word frequencies, term connections, and word clusters to provide insights into what vocabulary is communicated and utilized within the data (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2016). The first dataset utilizes the sanitized text from the data set pulled from WebDataRA to provide information on the most frequently used words, links between terms and more to understand contextually what was most popular as a topic of conversation. The second textual data set was transcribed from the political memes into an Excel file, then uploaded into the software. VoyantTools provided an opportunity to dig deeper into the conversations of the network and discover popular terms and topics of discussion. This textual analysis is used to determine words or phrases relevant to gender representation within the network as well as providing a context for the views of the network. I created Word Clouds for both of these datasets and used them to examine congruency between #election2016 network and memes.

Meme sites and Google. One hundred units, or memes, were collected from convenience searches on Google, and popular meme sites politicalmemes.com and knowyourmeme.com. The popular meme sites cater to different audiences: politicalmeme.com focuses specifically on political memes; knowyourmeme.com is the Google of memes, allowing you to find memes anywhere from Kim Kardashian or SpongeBob to political memes. Google was used as a supplemental source to capture memes that were not shared on these two sites. On politicalmeme.com, 16 units were collected, searching the “election meme,” “Clinton meme,” and “Trump meme” tags. Another 16 units were collected from knowyourmeme.com, seven

using the “people” filter, and selecting “Donald Trump” folder. There was no Hillary Clinton folder to select on this site. The other nine from knowyourmeme.com were from the “events” filter, in the 2016 Presidential election folder. The remaining 68 units were collected from Google searches. The following searches were made on Google: 2016 election political memes (17 units), pro-Hillary Clinton memes 2016 (12 units), anti-Hillary Clinton memes 2016 (5 units), pro-Donald Trump memes 2016 (14 units), and anti-Donald Trump memes 2016 (20 units).

There are a few levels to the content analysis of the meme sample and how they were organized and coded (see Table 2). I used Excel as my workbook to organize my sample of memes. First, I transcribed text from the memes into an Excel column. In a second column of the Excel sheet, I then recorded the visual used by the meme mainly describing the candidates' body positions/language, facial expressions, physical appearance, and description of social/relational roles. For example, the meme of Hillary in the kitchen falls in line with stereotypical assumptions that women are caregivers cooking and making food for their families (see Figure 4).

Next, I coded memes systematically. First, I coded candidate focus, coding for which candidate the meme focused on (Trump, Clinton, or both). Next, I coded issue focus to determine if the issue of the meme was focused on current issues of the election or on past issues of either candidate's life (current, past, or not applicable). For example, a past issue could be the affair of Hillary Clinton's husband, former President Bill Clinton, with Monica Lewinsky, or Donald Trump's failed business ventures (see Figures 5 and 6). This is important to code for, if the issue discussed within the meme was a “current issue,” or one pertaining to the 2016 Presidential election, because like the example recalls, this is highlighting the unfortunate happenings of

Clinton's relationships. The reference falls in line with stereotypical representations of women - based on their relational roles rather than their political views. Then, I coded the descriptions of text and visual based on their sentiment of the candidate (1 = Positive about Trump; 2 = Negative about Trump; 3 = Positive about Clinton; 4 = Negative about Clinton; 5 = neutral). For example, a meme about Trump would be coded negative if its text says something against Trump (e.g., stupid) and depicts Trump in an unflattering way (e.g., his facial expression; see Figure 7). There were some memes that had dual sentiment if they contained both Clinton and Trump within them. Then, I coded for the existence of congruency of the sentiment (1 = yes; 0 = no).

Then, I recorded my interpretations of messages within the text and visuals of the meme. After recording the interpreted messages of textual and visuals of the memes, I coded for gender stereotypes in the text and the visual separately (1 = Assertive/Strength; 2 = Morality; 3 = Capability; 4 = Appearance; 5 = Relationships; 6 = Career/Profession; 7 = Emotional; 8 = Emotionless). Assertive/strength stereotypes were coded based on words or visuals that are common to power (see Figure 8). Morality touches on the candidates' beliefs or portrays them in a way that makes a comment about their beliefs or values (see Figure 9). Capability questions the candidate's likableness and ability to be president (see Figure 10). Appearance is based on body language, skin color, body parts, clothes; for example, Trump's orange hue of his skin. Relationships is based on any discussion of roles the candidates play, for example referencing their marriage, children, or parents. Memes were coded as emotional if the candidates it depicted as overly expressive or the text comments on their emotions (see Figure 11). Emotionless was coded when the candidate was depicted as straight face, uncaring, or depicted as cold and closed off.

Before coding this category, morality was not included in the original coding scheme, so I left the cells of these memes blank. After completing all original coding, I examined similarities within the blank cells and saw that many of the memes were making opinions about the candidates' morality and moral standing, for example, comparing Trump to Hitler. Therefore, I added morality as a stereotype into my coding scheme (see Figure 12 for an example). I then recoded the memes with my new coding scheme. Again, some memes were coded for dual stereotypes if they contained both Clinton and Trump within them. To measure congruency within the messages, I coded to see if congruency existed (1 = yes) or did not exist (0 = no). I used the PivotTable functions in Excel to determine frequencies and percentages of the sentiments and stereotypes within the political memes. I performed Pivot Table functions for candidate focus, issue focus, sentiment of text, sentiment of visuals, the congruency of sentiment, stereotypes in the text, stereotypes in the visuals, and the congruency of stereotypes. Within each of those tables, I filtered by candidate to see what percentage was dedicated to each candidate.

Results

RQ1: How is gender represented in political memes focusing on the 2016 presidential election?

Of the 100 memes collected, 49% were Trump focused, 35% were Clinton focused, and 16% were focused on both candidates. There was a higher focus on Trump within the meme sample.

Text sentiment. The text used within the memes overall was negative about the candidates with 50% negative about Trump and 34% negative about Clinton. Within the Trump-focused memes, 74% of the textual sentiment was negative. Within the Clinton-focused memes, 74% were negative. In the both-focused memes, 81% were negative about Trump and 44% were

negative about Clinton. Seven of the memes were focused on America being the one to lose the election. There was a sense of hopelessness within those memes, perpetuating the feeling that no matter which candidate wins, America as a country will be the true loser of the 2016 election. When both-candidates were presented, there were dual-sentiments within the memes; 38% had negative sentiment toward Trump and positive sentiment toward Clinton; 54% had negative sentiment toward Trump and negative sentiment toward Clinton. Results show that Trump was depicted negatively but the majority depict both candidates negatively.

Visual sentiment. The visuals used in memes were negative about the candidates: 49% negatively depicted Trump and 25% negatively depicted Clinton. Within the Trump-focused memes, 80% were negative and within the Clinton-focused memes 66% were negatively depicting her. In the both-focused memes, 63% were negative about Trump and 13% were negative depictions of Clinton. When both-candidates were presented, there were dual-sentiments within the visuals: 33% depicted both candidates positively; 56% depicted Trump negatively and Clinton positively.

Text stereotype. The three most popular stereotypes throughout the text within the memes were career/profession (18%), capability (17%), and appearance (16%). Within the Trump-focused memes, appearance (24%), capability (18%), and emotional (14%) were the highly-used stereotypes (see Figures 13, 14, and 15). In the Clinton-focused memes, career/profession (31%), relationships (23%), and assertiveness/strength (17%) were the most popular. When both candidates were of focus, capability (44%) and morality (13%) were the stereotypes used. Dual-stereotypes only occurred in two memes regarding textual stereotypes: both memes depicted Clinton as assertive and strong referring to her toughness through pneumonia and depicting Trump as emotional due to Megyn Kelly being mean (see Figure 16).

Visual stereotype. Visually, the stereotypes that were depicted the most were emotional (27%), assertiveness/strength (25%), and appearance (18%). Within the Trump-focused memes, emotional (31%), appearance (29%), and assertiveness/strength (18%) were the highly-used stereotypes. Attention was given to Trump's appearance – mainly making a mockery of the size of his hands, the orange hue of his skin, and the unruliness of his hair. Memes focused on Trump's emotions, either blatantly writing something about them or utilizing photos of Trump in moments of anger, frustration, and sadness. Other themes that I noticed in my content analysis were a focus on his disregard for others' feelings (see Figure 17), the depictions of Trump in moments of power like a god (see Figure 8), and Trump's weakness and inability to take criticism from Fox News (see Figure 18).

In the Clinton-focused memes, emotional (31%), assertiveness/strength (23%), and emotionless (20%) were the most popular depictions of Clinton. The Clinton-focused memes often used photos that depicted Clinton as cold, serious, or unwelcoming to the viewers. There was a great deal of attention given to her email scandal and moment surrounding her trail and evasion of consequences. When both candidates were of focus, assertiveness/strength (50%) and morality (13%) were the stereotypes most highly depicted. Dual-stereotypes only occurred in two memes regarding textual stereotypes, the same two memes as the text stereotypes depicting Clinton as assertive and strong, and Trump as emotional.

RQ2: Is there congruency between the visual and textual messages in the political memes?

Sentiment congruency. The messages were measured by sentiment and stereotype. Overall, 56% of the memes were congruent in their sentiment, meaning that the sentiment of the text and the sentiment of the visual matched based on the coding. In Trump-focused memes, 63% of the memes were congruent. In the Clinton-focused memes, 54% were congruent. When

both candidates were the focus, only 38% were congruent in their sentiments. An example of a meme that had sentiment congruency can be seen in Figure 19 and an example of incongruence can be seen in Figure 20. Figure 19 is coded as congruent for sentiment because the text used in the meme was negative about Trump - emasculating him for being “beaten up by a girl.” The picture used for the meme was also negative about Trump - depicting him frowning, looking upset.

Stereotype congruency. Stereotype congruency was not as congruent as sentiment; only 32% of the textual and visual stereotypes were congruent based on the coding for stereotypes. In the Trump-focused memes, 41% were congruent. In the Clinton-focused memes, 26% were congruent, and in the both-focused memes, 19% were congruent in their stereotypes. An example of a meme that had stereotype congruency can be seen in Figure 8 and an example of incongruence can be seen in Figure 21. Figure 21 was coded as incongruent for gender stereotype because the text was coded as relationship as it is directly referring to Clinton’s husband. The image was coded as emotional because it uses an image depicting Clinton crying.

RQ3: Is there congruency between terms brought up on Twitter using #election2016 and the terms in political memes?

Gephi provided the opportunity for analysis for this information and provided insight into who were prominent leaders within the community, the distance of actors within the network, and closeness of the communities (see Figure 3). Communities within the network are represented by specific colors and there are three distinct ones to discuss. Purple represents the cluster with the center leader being Twitter user POTUS (President of the United States). Given that the data was pulled spanning the two months before to the two months after the election, it is difficult to distinguish which President of the United States was actually the most active –

Barack Obama or Donald Trump. Green represents the cluster with Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) at the center, acting as the individual most included in the communication of that network. Orange represents the last cluster of the network, which is the smallest of the three, with Carmine Zozzora at the center. After some research on Twitter, I discovered Carmine Zozzaro is an individual who is a large Trump supporter, blatantly disclosing his support in his bio of Trump and the National Rifle Association.

Gephi also allows researchers to run some statistical tests to gather information about the communities and the network. One element important to understanding a network is the diameter of the network – this network has a diameter of 4. The diameter allows researchers to understand how many participants it takes to get from one side of the network to the other (netlytics.org). Another element is the modularity of the network – this network’s modularity is 0.672. Modularity examines the closeness of the different clusters of the network, allowing us to understand how tight-knit the network is as a whole (netlytics.org). Any modularity value over 0.5 is considered to represent clusters that have clear distinctions, meaning the clusters do not interact at a high level. This provides an important insight that the clusters are not discussing with other communities that may have different views.

The word cloud, populated by the WebDataRA data set in VoyantTools, shows that Trump is the dominating topic (see Figure 22). We see “America” and “president” as other notable topics along with Obama. There is no mention of Hillary Clinton in the word cloud. In fact, the only mention of the left side is Obama and liberals. The Terms Berry population provides similar findings (see Figure 23). Searching within the data for “Hillary” only shows the name mentioned 15 times, compared to “Trump” mentions at 449 times.

The word cloud populated from the meme-transcribed data resulted in similar findings of Trump being a popular topic (see Figure 24). The terms with the highest frequency were Trump (16) and Donald (12). Clinton was more frequent within this dataset with “Clinton” having 12 occurrences and “Hillary” having six occurrences. The memes’ Terms Berry is in line with the word cloud – “Donald” and “Trump” combined occurred 28 times within the text, “Hillary” and “Clinton” combined only occurred 17 times (see Figure 25).

RQ4: Do the memes focus on current issues of the 2016 election or draw reference to past events?

Overall, the results show that 77% of the memes sampled focused on current issues related to the presidential election. Within the memes related to Trump, 80% were focused on current issues, while 16% were focused on his past, including his failed businesses and marriages, his medical deferments, and the loan he received from his father. Thirty-four percent of the Clinton-focused memes focused on her past, including her political career and how she was perceived to constantly change her political views, and on her husband, 42nd President Bill Clinton, and his affair with a White House intern during his term. Two memes were not applicable because one did not have text on it and the other did not reference the campaign directly, only saying, “There will be hell toupee” depicting Trump to be yelling and upset.

Discussion

Second wave feminism looks at the representation of gender and the underrepresentation of women in media, with its focus on public discrimination against women and the eradication of gender stereotypes throughout the media (Tully, 2017). Second wave feminist theory provided the strongest framework for my research because it examined the interplay of gender and power during a time women were making headway in male-dominated professions. The 2016

presidential election was a historic moment in politics and the progress women have made because Hillary Clinton was the first female presidential candidate who had made it to the final vote. It is important to examine how representation of women has changed since the 1960s, and if there has been any progress to a more equal representation within media. Based on the findings of this research, the gender representation within media remains stagnant. The data shows that women are still underrepresented within this network and the content of the memes. Donald Trump was a driving force and topic within all datasets. This maintains the patriarchal assumptions of politics and it being a man's profession. Just under half of the memes (49%) were coded as Trump-focused; we see the maintenance of underrepresentation of women within the measure for congruency between the network and the memes. The word clouds show that Trump was a common and highly discussed topic and Clinton was minuscule or non-existent in the data. I was expecting Clinton to be a close second in driving forces and topics of discussion within the network using the #election2016 because she was a primary candidate and runner up of the election. The network analysis shows that many of the heavy actors driving discourse were Trump supporters, or organizations that supported things Trump stood for.

Gender stereotypes remain relatively unchanged on social media. Previous research shows that popular gender stereotypes are based on emotions, ability or intelligence, appearance, and relationships (Anderson, 2011; Oikonomou, 2014). My research provided evidence that these stereotypes are maintained within memes; overall emotional (27%), assertiveness/strength (25%), and appearance (18%) were the most prominent. Regardless of the candidate's gender, female-typical stereotypes were the most utilized to discuss and make judgments about the candidates. The most used stereotypes to talk about Trump were appearance (24%), capability (18%), and emotional (14%); and to depict Trump visually, emotional (31%), appearance (29%),

and assertiveness/strength (18%) were the most popular. The stereotypes to depict Clinton were somewhat in line with stereotypical representations of gender, but also adopted male-typical stereotypes to depict her. Textual messages of Clinton memes focused on her career/profession (31%), relationships (23%), and assertiveness/strength (17%), and the visual messages used emotional (31%), assertiveness/strength (23%), and emotionless (20%) to depict her. Feminine stereotypes of judging women on their appearance, emotional stability, and in connection to their relationships, “hijacks” the woman’s political image and diminishes the way in which their audience, or voters, view her (Anderson, 2011).

Although findings show that the memes were highly focused on current events (77%), the topics of the past issues they focused on are problematic in their continuation of gender stereotypes. Most of the past issues discussed in relation to Trump were his failed businesses, his medical deferments, and the loan he received from his father. Memes focusing on Trump’s past maintain the depictions of men in terms of business and money, perpetuating the idea that men are the breadwinners. Clinton’s past issues were mainly focused on her husband’s affair with Monica Lewinsky during his presidency in 1998. Focusing on Clinton’s tumultuous relationship with her husband is in line with stereotypical representation of gender because it is not talking about Clinton directly, it talks about her in relation to her husband and their relationship; this maintains the idea that women are only understood in terms of their social or relationship roles like wife or mother.

Overall, the messages sent throughout the memes, both textual and visual messages, were coded as negative. When filtered by candidate, memes about Trump were highly negative for textual (73%) and visual (80%) messages. Clinton had similar results for her textual (74%) and visual (66%) messages. However, it is interesting to note that Clinton has a lower percentage

of negative visual messages compared to Trump because it is not aligned with what previous research shows. Typically, women in politics are represented in a more negative way compared to their male counterparts (Spencer, 2017). The 2016 election is a difficult election to measure sentiment, especially when looking only at Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. I believe that the American people did not truly like either candidate and therefore needed to vote for whom they believed was the lesser of two evils.

This research sought to understand how memes could work with the understanding of advertising to send messages and allow the audience to form impressions and opinions about those messages. When measuring congruency for sentiment and stereotypes between the textual and visual messages of the memes, I found that 56% of sentiment was congruent and only 32% of the stereotypes were congruent. This is an unfortunate finding but provides insight into how we can view memes and work to improve this congruency. Research in advertising shows that to process messages easily and, therefore, lead to purchase of an item, the text-image congruency must exist (Van Rompay et al., 2010). In the political memes, it does not – if it did exist, it could provide audiences a more efficient way to form their impressions about political candidates or issues. As discussed earlier, the findings that the memes are focused mainly on current issues (77%) further proves that memes are used as a form of political communication to create discourse and action about political issues as identified by Milner's research (2013). Focusing on current events in memes allow these topics to be at the forefront of conversation and helps to get the message to more people.

Based on my findings, I argue that, overall, political memes maintain the underrepresentation of women within media and they maintain stereotypical gendered expectations of politicians. While memes were not the only source of media coverage during the

election, it is important to consider how memes reflect other media representation. Memes pulled visuals from mainstream media like political debates and other news coverage of the election and candidates. My findings show that Clinton was essentially non-existent in the discourse on social media, and was portrayed less in memes compared to Trump; Clinton, the female candidate, was underrepresented compared to Trump, the male candidate. They maintain these gendered expectations because when either candidate is shown acting outside of them, they are perceived as a negative rather than just acting as a person. Results also suggest the importance of understanding the impact of memes within political campaigns and communication. Memes will only continue to grow as their popularity and the use of social media rises within the political realm, therefore, it is important to understand how these pieces of digital communication and culture can be used strategically.

Limitations

One limitation to this study was the lack of memes found within the network. At the start of this project, I was hoping to find memes used within the discourse of the network and analyze the content within those memes. I also only used one social media platform, Twitter, but memes are shared across all social media platforms. Another limitation of this research is that Clinton was non-existent within the Twitter network; whether all tweets were deleted or I didn't have access to Clinton's community and therefore, could not have a true comparison between Clinton and Trump. A future study could replicate and add Instagram and Facebook to look at meme groups or meme pages to use for their sample collection. At the data collection stage of my research, one limitation is the use of memes sites and Google – memes could have been removed from those sites, or from other sites. If someone wanted to replicate my study, using the same keyword searches on these platforms could also pull up different memes based on the algorithm

of the search engines. Lastly, I am a researcher who identifies as cisgender female, therefore I could have inherent biases as a female examining gender and gender representation.

Future Research

Based on this research analysis and findings, there are areas where future research should look into: first, to examine the impact of the messages, sentiment and stereotypes, research could examine viewer's responses or perceptions of the candidates to see if congruency is important in impression formation of people. This could also allow for examination of the power of memes and their messages, providing insight into how politicians can strategically use them within their political campaigns. Future research could repeat this study with the 2020 election which provides overall more likeable candidates, because results showed that the 2016 candidates were not very well liked. With more likable candidates, it would be interesting to see how gender representation could change. With more diversity in age, race, and sexual orientation than ever before in politics, a comparative analysis could be done to inspect if stereotypes across these social constructs are maintained in political memes. Overall, more research into memes and their influence in politics would benefit all parties involved, providing insight into how they can be used to shape our judgements and potentially, our voting choices.

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Appendix A

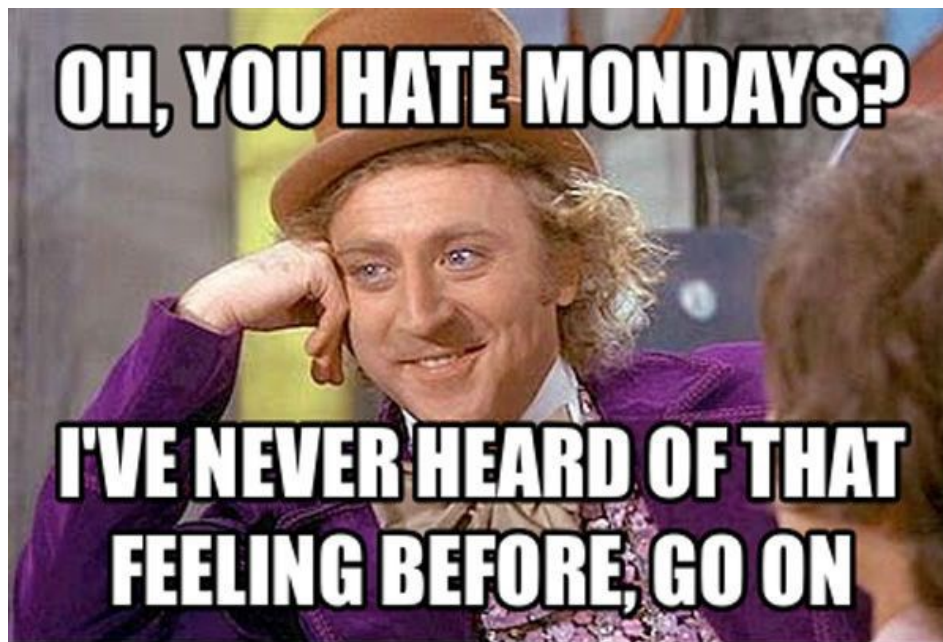


Figure 1. Example of popular Gene Wilder meme.



Figure 2. Occupy Wall Street meme utilizing humor surround the issue.

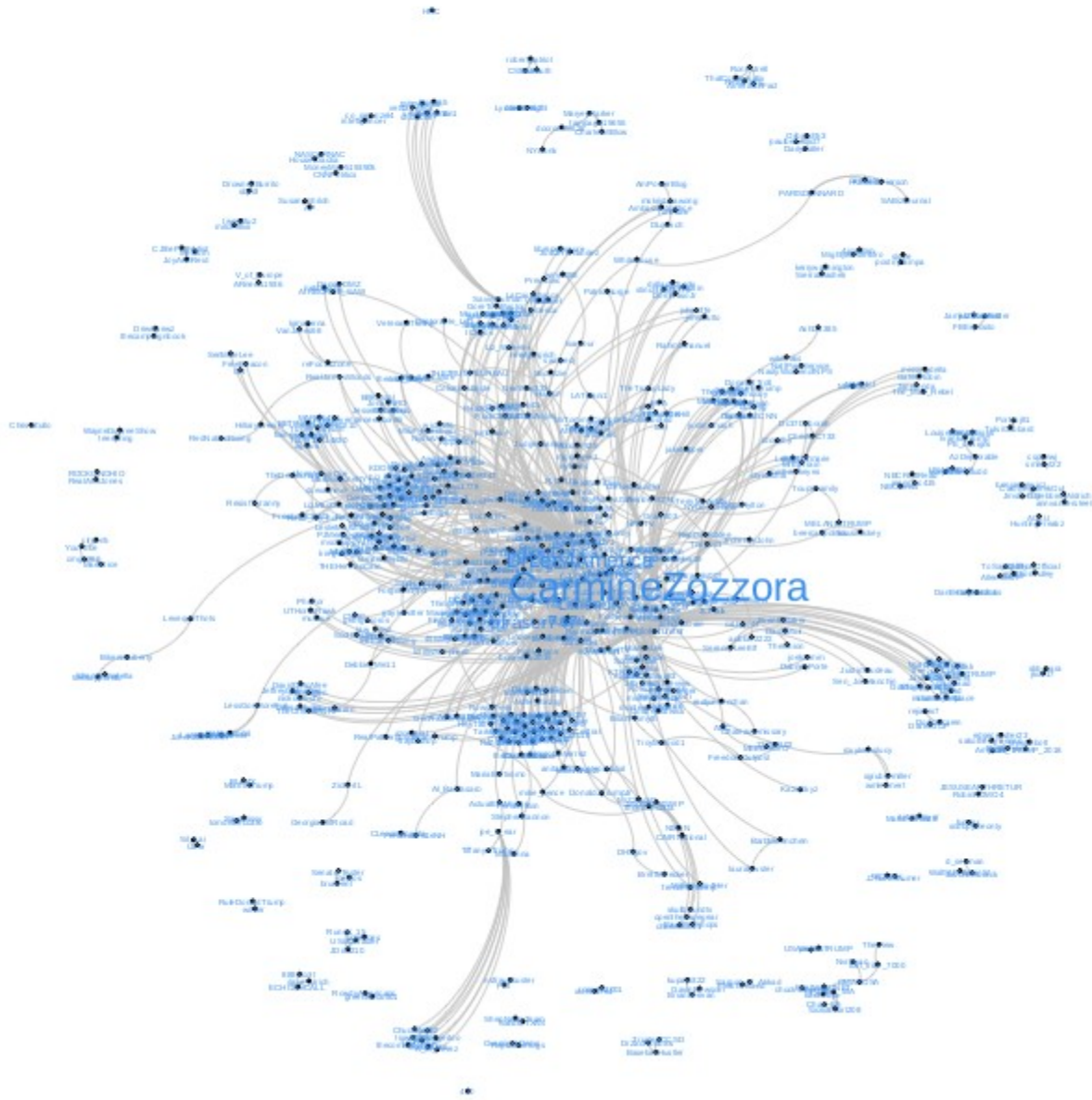


Figure 3. Network analysis of the #election2016 activity collected via Gephi software.



Figure 4. Gender stereotyped depiction of Hillary Clinton.

Have You Seen Hillary's Monica Lewinski Impression?



Figure 5. A meme poking fun Clinton's husband's affair with Monica Lewinski.



Figure 6. Meme joking about Trump's failed businesses throughout his past.

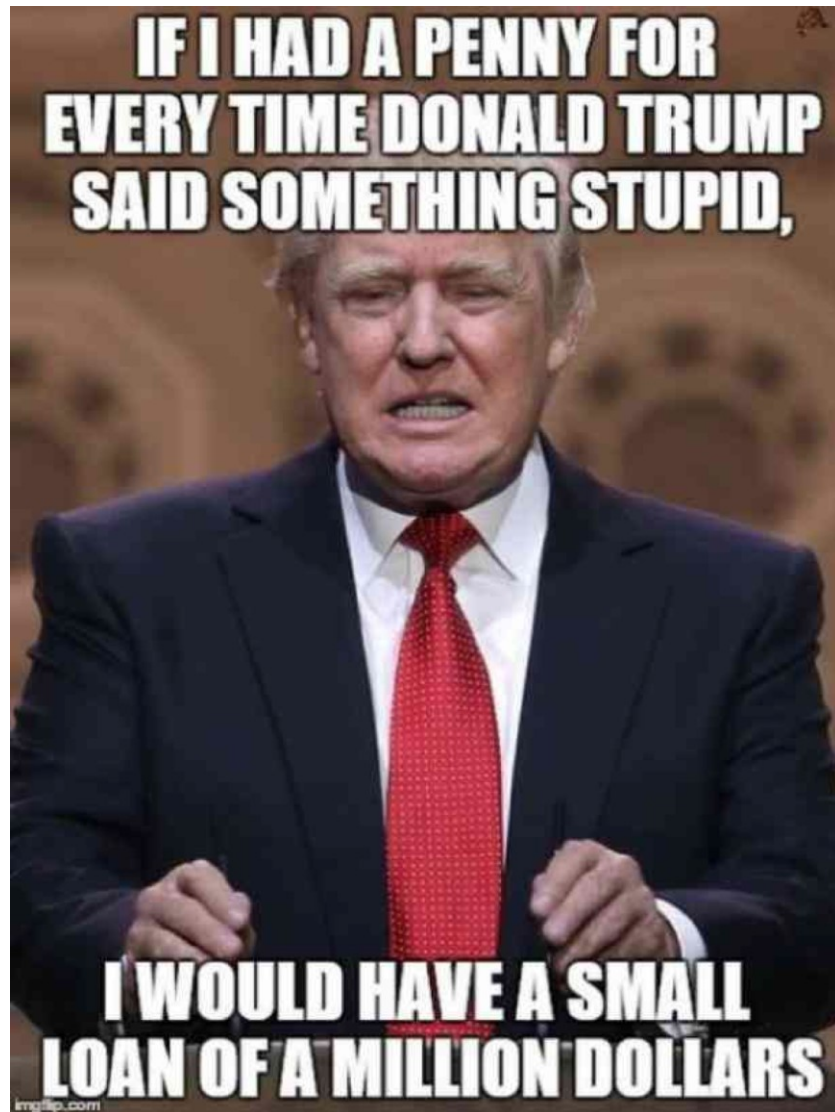


Figure 7. Meme presenting Trump grimacing making fun of his intellect and privilege.



Figure 8. Depiction of Donald Trump in powerful role of a god; also, an example of stereotype congruency.

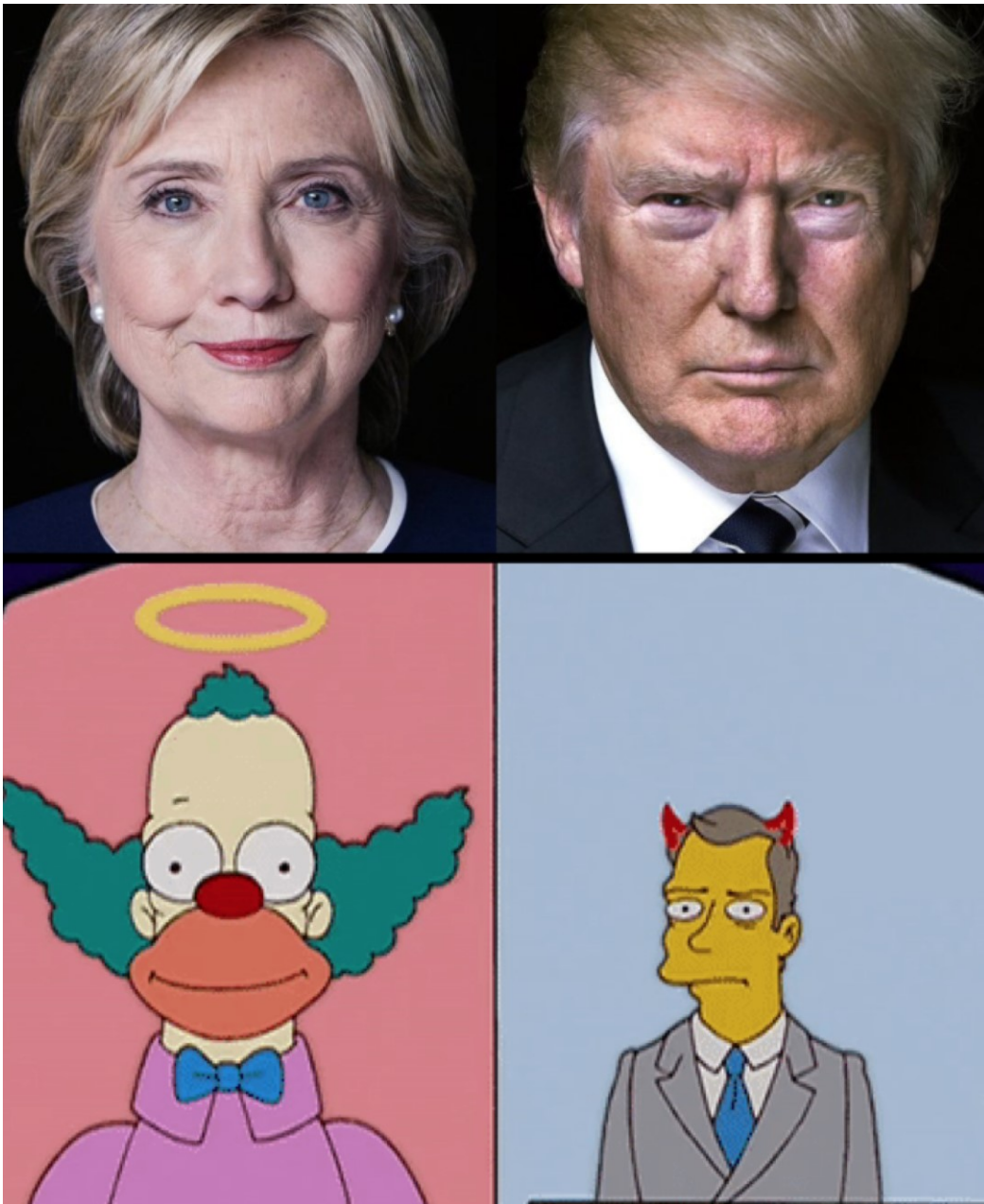


Figure 9. Comparing Clinton and Trump to *The Simpsons* characters depicted as angel and devil.

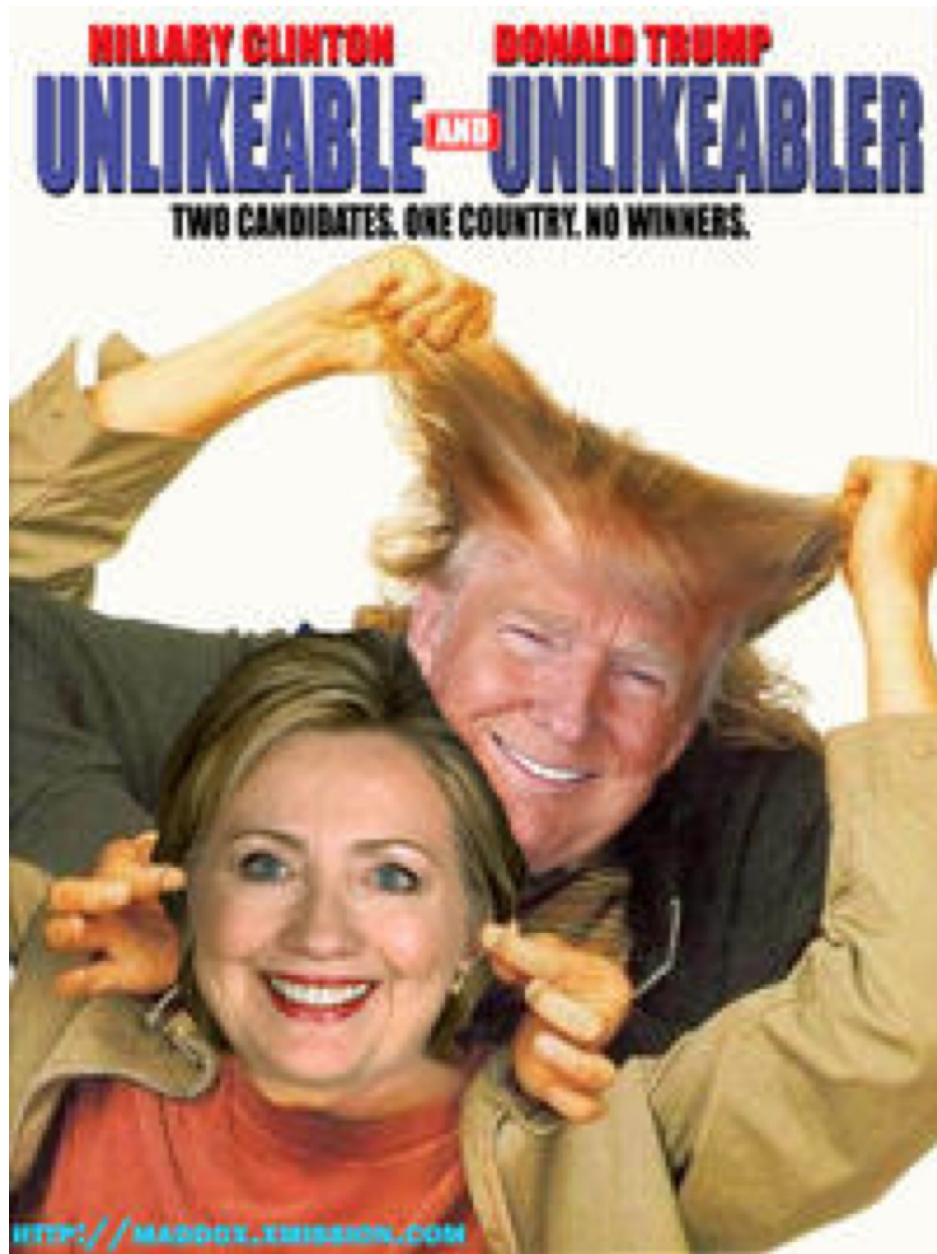


Figure 10. Photoshopped meme of Clinton and Trump onto the movie poster of *Dumb and Dumber*.



Figure 11. Meme depicting Trump as highly emotional and angry.

WELL
WELL
WELL



Figure 12. Meme suggesting Trump's morality is comparable to Adolf Hitler.



Figure 13. A meme making fun of Trump's appearance referencing his small hands.



Figure 14. Poking fun at the lack of capability of both candidates in the election.



Figure 15. Clinton's face photoshopped on a wildebeest commenting on her emotional stability.



Figure 16. Meme commenting on Clinton's toughness/strength compared to Trump's.



Figure 17. A meme depicting Trump as uncaring about feelings of American people.



Figure 18. Meme questioning Trump's strength because he cannot take jokes from *Fox News*.



Figure 19. Example of congruent sentiment meme of Donald Trump.



Figure 20. Meme of Hillary Clinton showing incongruent sentiment.



Figure 21. Example of an incongruent stereotype meme.

Appendix B

Table 1

Row Labels	Column Labels														Total Count of Author	Total Count of Retweets
	1/25/17		1/26/17		1/27/17		1/28/17		1/29/17		1/30/17		(blank)			
	Count of Author	Count of Retweets	Count of Author	Count of Retweets	Count of Author	Count of Retweets	Count of Author	Count of Retweets	Count of Author	Count of Retweets	Count of Author	Count of Retweets	Count of Author	Count of Retweets		
bocavista2016	5	5	6	6	11	11	11	11	11	11	4	4			48	48
CarmineZozzora	16	16	28	28	24	24	21	21	28	28	10	10			127	127
ChatByCC	7	7	13	13	11	11	1	1	5	5	3	3			40	40
Education4Libs	2	2	14	14	11	11	6	6	21	21	8	8			62	62
LindaSuhler	8	8	16	16	11	11	8	8	14	14	18	18			75	75
LouDobbs	5	5	6	6	6	6	10	10	9	9	5	5			41	41
Lrihendry	2	2	8	8	6	6	9	9	12	12	5	5			42	42
mikandynothem	1	1	4	4	5	5	12	12	4	4	1	1			27	27
realjunsongchan	12	12	11	11	3	3	6	6	15	15	10	10			57	57
TruthFeedNews	8	8	18	18	18	18	18	18	14	14	16	16			92	92
Grand Total	66	66	124	124	106	106	102	102	133	133	80	80			611	611

Table 2

Content Analysis: Coding of Meme Sample Using Excel

Candidate Focus	Issue Focus	Sentiment	Gender Stereotypes	Congruency
Clinton	Current issue	1 = Positive about Trump	1 = Assertive/Strength	1 = yes
Trump	Past Issue	2 = Negative about Trump	2 = Morality	0 = no
Both	No issue mentioned	3 = Positive about Clinton	3 = Capability	
		4 = Negative about Clinton	4 = Appearance	
		5 = Neutral	5 = Relationships	
			6 = Career/Profession	
			7 = Emotional	
			8 = Emotionless	

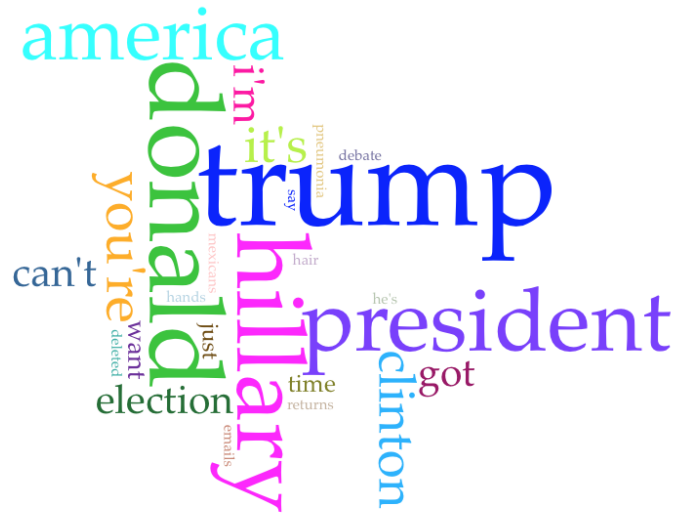


Figure 24. Word cloud created on voyanttools.com from the text transcribed from 100 memes

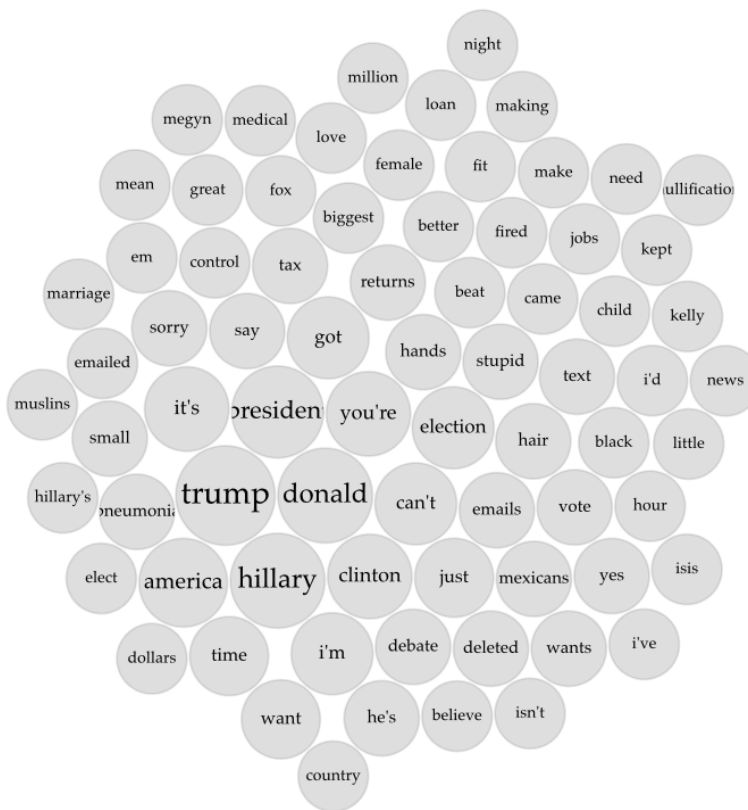


Figure 25. Word cloud created on voyanttools.com from the text transcribed from 100 memes