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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/z7vr-r080>

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Memes, Themes, and Rhetorical Schemes:
Analyzing the themes and rhetorical devices used by meme creators in American political
internet memes in the first week of the Ukrainian-Russian War

by

Brice Zimmerman

Under the Direction of Cynthia Hoffner, Ph.D.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of the Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2023

ABSTRACT

Internet memes carry news messages to mass audiences through social media platforms. In seconds, global events can be transmitted to millions of users in the form of an image with text overlayed. Despite the power of memes, there has been little scholarly research devoted to the selection mechanism of meme-makers. As both audience and creator, meme-makers' craft and consume messages capable of influence. Grounded in work on rhetorical analysis and framing, this study examined memes posted to conservative and liberal affiliated Reddit communities in the wake of the first days of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The analysis focused on the themes and rhetorical devices utilized by meme-makers to present political actors and issues to the American public. The results revealed 10 themes designed for conservative and/or liberal audiences and five rhetorical devices used by meme-makers to craft memetic messages.

INDEX WORDS: Memes, Thematic analysis, Rhetoric, Politics, Participatory culture, Russia, Ukraine

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2023

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December 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude and thanks to the following people and institutions that have intentionally or unwittingly aided in the peregrination that has become the pursuit and completion of this master's thesis and degree. Foremost, I am indebted to and most thankful for my wife, Diane, for her multiple levels of support and motivation. As I have sacrificed my time in this pursuit, she has sacrificed hers equally and she has been an unwavering advocate.

Secondly, I'm deeply thankful for the help, guidance, and expertise provided by my thesis committee chair, Dr. Cynthia Hoffner. Her enthusiasm for research and her willingness, availability, and dedication has been invaluable in this process. Dr. Hoffner's classes were instrumental lessons and aided in transforming the way that I read, analyzed, and understood scholarly articles and foundational theoretic principles of communication. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the other two members of the committee, Dr. Dror Walter and Dr. Jaye Atkinson. The critique, feedback, and encouragement from both was crucial in the development and refinement of this study. These three members of my committee and the entirety of the faculty in the communications department at Georgia State University have been fundamental influences and motivators for a burgeoned and dedicated interest in scholarly work.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my grandmother and professor Jane England and my father, Jim Zimmerman, both of whom have passed. My grandmother also earned a master's degree from Georgia State and was a life-long learner that was still pursuing a Ph.D. when she died. My father died while I was in the middle of this thesis and his natural curiosity and inquisitive nature was a constant inspiration in the quest to complete this study.

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1 INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation, on orders from President Vladimir Putin, initiated a military campaign and invaded the border country of Ukraine. The military action sparked a violent conflict between the two nations. The first state-sanctioned military action between two sovereign European nations since the mid-twentieth century, the Ukrainian-Russian war ignited global digital discourse on social media platforms and websites (Miller, 2022). In the United States, Republican and Democratic politicians participated in discussions and issued statements on foreign policy. In digital communities centered on political affiliation and conversation, political memes surfaced instantaneously and continued in real-time with developments of the conflict, advancing narratives about prominent American politicians, foreign policy, and domestic policy (Miller, 2022).

Dating back to the presidential debates of 2012 in the United States, social media platforms have materialized as prolific breeding grounds for political discourse with widespread participation from the general public, elected officials, media outlets, and political entities (Tay, 2012; Williams, 2016). The image macro meme has emerged as a highly transmissible form of digital and visual communication in political expression and virtual rhetoric, easily consumed and often intended to be humorous (Jenkins, 2014; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Tay, 2012). In the last decade, image macro memes and memetic themes and content have infiltrated the political mainstream and transcended digital environments, even reaching levels of commodification (Denisova, 2019; Shifman, 2014a). The image macro meme is a pervasive content item due to its editable format, simplistic composition, digital accessibility, easy distribution, and consumable blend of imagery and text to quickly deliver a message. Large-scale geopolitical events generate fertile meme environments and invite meme creators, with diverse political ideologies,

motivations, and viewpoints, to generate, engage, and influence political conversations (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016).

Memes are being developed and disseminated in congruence with up-to-the-minute imagery and news on digital platforms. Each image macro meme creator has curated a message with a selection of imagery and text. Within this iterative construction process, meme-makers are framing political messages for audiences (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Memes are rooted in cultural understanding, relying on audiences to recognize specific references, and a meme-maker's decision to use a singular word, term, phrase, or image can effectively generate a frame effect (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). Identifying themes and rhetorical devices deployed by meme-makers could further the understanding of the meme creation process and the tools by which meme-makers craft messages that can be pervasive, persuasive, and weaponized in the online ideological battlefield.

The news of the Ukrainian-Russian war in February of 2022 unleashed a stream of internet memes designed for audiences in the United States, posted by meme-makers and meme-distributors from across the political spectrum (Miller, 2022). In the participatory digital culture of the world wide web, memes are created and disseminated by the traditional audiences of the mainstream news mass media (Lim, 2013). At the time of writing, scholarly work is lacking in the examination of the themes and rhetorical devices that inform and constitute framing perspectives in the creation and design of internet memes (Dean, 2019; Ross & Rivers, 2017). This study sought to examine political internet memes created for American audiences inspired by the Ukrainian-Russian war. The study analyzed the thematic messaging used by meme-creators and identified themes and rhetorical devices used in political memes. The themes were explored in a constant comparative analysis for both conservative and liberal meme audiences.

The rhetorical devices were not compared between the two Reddit communities and were present in the entire data selection.

Through the investigation of political internet memes, this study adds to scholarly material on memetic content from a communication perspective in a participatory digital culture. Memes are powerful rhetorical tools that contain persuasive, targeted messages with the capability to influence audiences (Denisova, 2019; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Shifman, 2014a; Vickery, 2014). Understanding and decoding the strategies, methods, and techniques meme-makers use to curate and deliver political messages through memes is important to reveal the persuasive potency of memes. Coupled with limitless reach to internet audiences and unencumbered by traditional news media hierarchies, memes have the potential to become the dominant political language of the internet, if they are not already.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Enter the Meme Stream

The term “meme” existed before the internet. Dawkins (1976) conceptualized memes as small, easily transmissible bits of information with cultural relevance that could be passed from individual-to-individual. An example of a non-digital meme could be an oral tradition, simplistic game, or a culturally recognized slogan or phrase; for instance, a Native American creation myth, playing “patty-cake,” or the popular 1960s term “flower power.” Memes adapted quickly to the digital world and the age of the internet (Duchscherer & Dovidio, 2016). Presently, the word “meme” has colloquially adapted to represent the term “internet meme.” Milner (2016) laid out four different types of memes: memetic phrases, memetic videos, memetic performances, and memetic images. Memetic videos and images are the most pervasive in current digital communication practices and platforms and can be altered, reproduced, updated, imitated, and shared across contexts with varying language, messages, imagery, characters, structure, and composition (Milner, 2016). Described as “cultural hieroglyphs” that do not possess independent meaning, memes only obtain meaning within the context of the meme-making culture and among an audience with shared contextual notions (Shomova, 2022). For example, an internet meme, with text in English, relating the Ukrainian-Russian war to domestic issues in the United States will resonate less or not at all with non-English speaking audiences. Furthermore, if the audience has no knowledge of the language or the imagery used, no contextual framework, or no cultural intersectionality with the delivered memetic message, then the meme is essentially rendered an undecipherable hieroglyph.

Internet memes, while in use and popular in online communities and with neophyte internet users since the 1990s, reached the mainstream by the mid-2000s (Denisova, 2019) and

broadened to massive audiences in the United States during the 2012 presidential election (Nee & De Maio, 2019). An online phenomenon, on-and-offline communities have become meme literate and internet memes are viewed as common, regular forms of content consumption in daily digital interactions (Denisova, 2019). Effortlessly transitioning between mainstream, subculture, and niche audiences, internet memes can be contained to specific communities and digital platforms or grow into widespread, multi-platform archetypes (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021).

A meme is designed to go viral (Bebic & Volarevic, 2018). Shomova (2022) noted that a meme's ability to compress information "to a molecule," allows the message of the meme to be immediately identifiable and instantly polarizing for audiences. A central ingredient to viral success is the utilization of humor, ironic situations, and subversive messaging (Dean, 2019). Humorous content that can be quickly consumed, understood, digested, and inspire an engagement response (like, retweet, comment, share, etc.) can spread unimpeded by complexity on a social networking platform (Bebic & Volarevic, 2018). Memes must be easily shareable, both in content and in composition, to achieve accelerated circulation across multiple platforms and adoption from numerous social groups (Dean, 2019). The concepts carried by memetic content is not reliant on factual information and memetic theory focuses on the capacity of memes to diffuse through a society, virtual and non-virtual (Milner, 2016). Memetic images are highly capable of virality because of ease of access, alteration, and shareability (Ross & Rivers, 2017). The image macro meme is the most prominent composition of internet memes. An image macro meme features an image or a series of images with text at the top and bottom of the graphic. The text at the upper portion of the image is the set-up language and the text at the bottom supplies the punchline.

2.1.1 *The Making of: Memes*

Internet memes' popularity might stem from how simple it is to create a meme. There are websites that exist purely for making memes and minimal computer literacy is necessary for a user to create a meme on any subject matter with any language desired (Lalancette & Small, 2020). Memes have an organic quality and meme-makers can morph meanings, messages, and intentions through processes of variation, competition, and selective practices, while also retaining information from previous meme incarnations or themes (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Since meme creation tools are available to any user that can access the internet, the pool of prospective meme-makers is theoretically limited only to the number of people that use the internet (Lalancette & Small, 2020). At the time of this writing, empirical research to investigate the individuals or social groups that are actively making memes is lacking, but Lalancette and Small (2020) posited that average citizens, politically and socially savvy citizens, and even political and corporate operatives could be making memes with a full spectrum of intentions and motivations. In general, internet memes are created for people to enjoy, and meme-makers are not composing content to become famous or have recognition bestowed upon viral success or social commentary (Miltner, 2014). Meme-makers are essentially anonymous and individuals claiming to be the creators of source material are not lauded in digital meme culture. Notably, not all memes are created for mass audiences. Meme creators might create a meme specifically for an individual, small group of people, or a larger, but secular group (Lalancette & Small, 2020).

The individuals that make memes on the internet, particularly the people that make successfully viral memes, are creating in an iterative environment. Meme culture rewards alteration, change, reiteration, and the recycling of current and past memes with a mixture of

similar or exact messages, designs, compositions, and structures. An established meme can change into a new meme, with differing or opposing, similar or reinforcing messages, topics, meanings, and feeling in a manner of minutes (Bebic & Volarevic, 2018) and often in congruence with real-time cultural and social events.

2.1.2 Memes, Effective Immediately

The ease of creation and speed of composition has made the internet meme, specifically the image macro, an accompanying element of the digital discourse of nearly any current event worthy of public opinion. Memes can even define the perceptions of individuals, groups, issues, policies, and opinions (Shifman, 2014b) while also challenging normative values and cultural infrastructure (Vickery, 2014). A meme can transmit powerful, yet simplistic messages that eliminate unnecessary informational bloat and slice an issue to its essence in an advocational or persuasive tone (Shifman, 2014a). Influential on discussions, social issues, and systemic values, memes have the ability to fortify existing attitudes or present effective counter-attitudinal messages (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013).

A meme that gains popularity and virality can circulate, appear, and reappear as an altered version in social media feeds and the repetitious nature of memes can form a cumulative effect (Dobson & Knezevic, 2017). Adopted and adapted by meme culture, a favorite meme can morph into similar, but distinctly different incarnations that generate variations of a discussion or conversation about a memetic theme or subject (Segev, Nissenbaum, Stoler, & Shifman, 2015). Memes also hold influence in news and political spheres. An effective instrument in forming collective thoughts and identity, internet memes are used to disperse political views, ideological beliefs, values, and news; both through personal and individual channels as well as governmental and organizational mediums (Bayerl & Stoyanov, 2016; Milner, 2013; Shomova, 2022).

2.1.3 *Memes, Politics, and Current Events*

The marriage of political commentary and media is significant, and the exponential growth, popularity, and propagation of internet memes has predictably forged a powerful bond between meme culture and political activity. Internet memes often employ humor to ridicule, belittle, or decry an intended political target (Ross & Rivers, 2017) and allow meme-makers to participate in and influence public conversation about politics and global events (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016). Memes have reached a level of importance in modern political communication practices that has legitimized their existence beyond providing basic humor and entertainment (Ross & Rivers, 2017). In the United States, memes primarily entered the political arena and crossed into the political mainstream during the 2012 presidential debates. User-generated and quickly adopted into the sharing routines of audiences across the country and world, memes disparaging Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's appearances, performances, speaking engagements, bodily actions, speech patterns, word choices, fashion choices, and any other distinguishable trait, event, or action was open content with creative license for meme creators to mold into virally capable memes (Nee & De Maio, 2019).

Tay (2012) described the explosion of political memes as "LOLitics" or laugh-out-loud politics. In the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the creativity of meme-makers was on full display as memes of candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were nearly as anticipated and popular as the political events that served up ingredients for meme content (Williams, 2016). The memes' proficiency of paring down complex political information into contextual images with humorous or otherwise engaging entertainment value that any lay person can understand (Tay, 2012) makes political figures, events, and issues more accessible and enjoyable to a broad section of the public (Penney, 2017). By making political memes funny,

edgy, and partisan, meme-makers can advance discussions and introduce narratives in the digital political sphere external from the designs and control of the American political machine.

Despite exponential creation, sharing, and engagement practices in mainstream political discourse on social media, most political science and research on memes focuses on meme creation as purely resultant and reactionary to political events (Dean, 2019). Communication and political science scholars may not be examining memes as a constitutive process for the spread of political information, birth of political discussions, and influence in attitudes and perceptions of individuals within and beyond the meme audience. Memes can be wielded as “rhetorical weapons” in political discourse (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). Engagement and identity politics are central motivations for meme audiences to create and share politically themed memes (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Shifman, 2014a). According to Dean (2019), social media platforms and discourse, and by extension memes, are construed as consequences of political news, events, or actions and not a constitutive part of the political communication landscape.

Dean (2019) noted that political scientists might be failing to recognize the volume of young people that experience politics, sometimes exclusively, through social media, including on discussion board forums like Reddit. Traditional political scientists may view social media as a medium for political communication and digital strategies but may not view social media communities as areas that generate organic, original political discourse. Dean (2019) contended that memes and other visual media offerings function in a way that influences a user to strongly identify with a meme message through activated elements of humor or pro-attitudinal messages. Memes have the capacity to consolidate allegiances (Dean, 2019). Memes that disparage can also intensify a user’s attitudes towards a political figure, policy, or issue (Dean, 2019). Memes can shape and influence the content of political discourse (Dean, 2019) and allow audiences to

establish rhetorical voice for nonconventional political participants (Howley, 2016; Shomova, 2022). Memes effortlessly transition between counterculture and mainstream with the capability to popularize unconventional, radical, extremist, and fringe political perspectives (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The prevalence and power of memes has increased the volume of political and current issues being discussed around the world. People utilize memes as a part of a digital participatory culture that creates, shares, discusses, and endorses user-generated content.

2.2 Participatory Culture

Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison's (2009) definition of a participatory culture outlined five characteristics: low barrier of entry for artistic expression and civic engagement; a supportive community for creation and sharing; the most experienced share knowledge and skills with the less experienced; the collective of contributors believe their participation has value, and a degree of social connection with others exists. An opposing cultural paradigm to consumerism and consumer culture, individuals in a participatory culture produce and contribute to the culture rather than solely consume. Participatory culture provides supportive frameworks for generating, sharing, experiencing, and evolving an individual's creations. A participatory culture produces an environment that encourages knowledge, skills, and information to be progressively passed from more experienced sections of the public to less experienced individuals (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009).

While the concepts and theoretical approaches of participatory cultures existed in social practice prior to the invention and global prominence of the internet, online communities and social media platforms engendered an environment with accessibility to tools, information, and expertise for creation, contribution, and production from the general public. Users can build several diverse, distinct, and specific networks that present unlimited opportunities for

participation (Lim, 2013). Social media, especially platforms that allow for anonymity, provide myriad of low-risk participatory actions. Users can participate through minor and non-resistant actions provided by innate features of a platform: liking a photo, retweeting a message, sharing a post, writing a comment or reply, or posting a meme. Political activism on social media can be ultra-simplistic with minimal risk, but still results in an individual gaining a sense of participation in societal and global issues which may be a motivation for users to post political content (Lim, 2013).

A political meme allows people to participate in political discourses and discussions with little resistance through humor and entertainment (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). The expansive digital territory covered by political memes allows meme messages to extend beyond the political sphere and attract ‘normal’ civilians (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Social media platforms, built to entice and reward participation are posterboards for political memes and platform features make sharing, engaging, discussing, and saving to edit, alter, or advance a meme’s message simplistic (Lalancette & Small, 2020). A meme can represent a gateway to political conversations and contain the ability to remove complexities and jargon from political information to make it palatable for larger audiences (Denisova, 2019).

Political memes can lead to prosocial participatory behaviors. A political meme might promote civic awareness or freely express the collective attitudes and ideologies of a faceless, creative cross-section of the populace (Silvestri, 2018). Participatory culture does not weigh the level of an individual’s participation differently. Theoretically, the culture simply creates the environment for any form of participation from the public.

However, participatory culture in the digital age does have limitations on the influential power of political memes. While internet access continues to grow across the world, people must

be connected to and understand the culture of online communities and social media platforms to properly consume meme messages. Political memes can also fall prey to the digital divide, or the gap between different groups based on factors such as age, location, and socioeconomic status (Lalancette & Small, 2020).

For instance, an internet political meme is completely ineffective as a form of communication for a homeless person with no access to online communities or social media accounts. Additionally, a person who is not computer and online literate, but may still have access to digital communities and social media accounts, could encounter a political meme and experience a similarly ineffective result. Memes are created, posted, and exist in an ever-flowing stream of information. The constant push of user-generated content limits the virtual shelf life for a meme, especially memes that do not reach viral status, and threatens the transparency status of political messages through memes (Lalancette & Small, 2020).

Memes, as a byproduct of participatory culture, are dependent on the actions of citizens and the public to gain momentum and share information. If a meme creator's aim is to advance political discussions, influence collective belief structures, or modify societal ideologies, a meme's fate is reliant on the public's participation to ascend to that goal. Participatory culture on social media, though determined by the individuals that comprise the public, can be easily infiltrated by political campaign operatives or bots that can manipulate and populate meme messages in order to serve campaign or political goals (Lalancette & Small, 2020). The creation and distribution of internet memes is dependent on a culture of participation. However, the process of developing new memes and modifying existing memetic themes has become a powerful tool for meme-makers seeking to affect audiences. In the creation process, meme-

makers may be actively framing information thematically, with the purposeful and deliberate selections of images and text, to influence the meaning and essence of political issues.

2.3 Political Ideology: The Right and Left

2.3.1 *American Conservatism*

To examine and analyze political memes intended for audiences in the United States, an understanding of the ideologies of the Republican and Democratic Party is necessary to decipher themes and frames in a qualitative study. Republican ideology in the United States is termed American conservatism (Farmer, 2005). Falling on the “right” of the left versus right ideological paradigm, conservative beliefs focus on the defense of institutions that are perceived to have societal value (Huntington, 1957). Institutions such as law, religion, economic production, and division of labor are functional pillars in determining how a society is organized (Johnson, Garnett, & Walker, 2016). American conservatives place significance in tradition as the collective experience of a culture and that each institution can use tradition as a beacon of reason (Johnson et al., 2016). However, conservatism adapts to modernity and changing social and political environments by discarding traditions selectively (Farmer, 2005). A fundamental element of American conservatism, and throughout the history of conservatism, is the concept of a moral order that is transcendent (Kirk, 1982). According to conservatives, humans have a responsibility to conform and mold society to this morality (Farmer, 2005; Kirk, 1982).

American conservative ideology holds a negative view of human nature, emphasizing imperfection and depravity. Conservatives exhibit skepticism to novel or contemporary morals with a pessimistic view of natural human behaviors and belief in a supreme moral order. The demonization of adversaries is a common tactic deployed by conservative politicians and as part of political messages. Conservatives believe that the role of government is to protect the free

market and provide security for the interests of the people. In the American conservative view, the State is to be militarily strong at the international level, strict in the enforcement of domestic laws, and supportive of social institutions with right-wing values, such as churches and families (Farmer, 2005).

The Republican Party and audience generally aligns with conservative capitalistic ideologies that stress an economic democracy. The market dictates prices and value of products and services whereas wages are based on demand. American conservatives see the performance of the free market as the collective predilection of the people participating in the marketplace and existing in American society. According to conservatives, the individuals making business decisions are beholden to the will of the people for their products and services (Johnson, 2012).

2.3.2 Modern American Liberalism

The Democratic Party in the United States occupies the left side of the American political spectrum. Modern American liberalism is the underlying ideology for the Democratic Party and the quest for a social democracy (Bell & Stanley, 2012). American liberalism blends classic liberal beliefs, such as the dedication to the sovereignty of the individual, with cultural liberalism and the philosophy that society should defend the moral rights of nonconformists (Bell & Stanley, 2012; Johnson, 2012). In the United States, liberal and Democratic ideology can include “leftist” attitudes that support socialistic endeavors and responsibilities of the State (Rossinow, 2012). Left-leaning liberals endorse social programs from the government that guarantee basic services to the public (Johnson, 2012; Rossinow, 2012). However, leftists and liberals are not interchangeable terms to aptly describe Democratic ideology, though liberal reform policies and left-wing radical thought have intersected on the political scene of the United States (Bell & Stanley, 2012).

American liberalism views the government as an institution with rational mechanisms to solve issues for the public through bureaucratic means and leadership (Johnson, 2012). In general, American liberals philosophically align with the concept of a free market, but in a mixed capitalist economy that still cultivates economic freedom and protection of private property while permitting the State to regulate economic activity to support social objectives (Johnson, 2012).

In the memes collected for this study, meme-makers extend beyond the confines of the traditional American conservative and liberal perspectives that form the base or centrist political ideologies of the Republican and Democratic parties. The content of the memes mock, deride, and satirize viewpoints by honing in and targeting core ideological beliefs of the extreme right, such as libertarians, and the extreme left, such as socialists, in order to attack members and policies of oppositional parties. The assigning of extreme versions of a political ideology to competing parties in the United States is a well-documented tactic by news media and politicians themselves in the attempt to devalue and delegitimize opponents (Dean, 2019; Farmer, 2005; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Sell, 2017; Tay, 2012).

2.4 Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

The advancement of communication technology and rise of social media gives the public and politicians a seat at the digital table for online conversation, but also nation-states and international governing bodies. The information war does not require armed conflict to be waged and is a competition of credibility between nations (Nye, 2004). The side of the winning narrative may be more important than the side of the winning army (Nye, 2004), but a digital and participatory environment with contributive opportunities from users has dented the reliability of traditional news media messaging (Saliu, 2023). However, even in the post-truth era, a term used

to describe the current period of information consumption when objective fact is less influential than personal belief, public diplomacy and soft power remain tactical methods of communicatory influence for nation-states around the world (Saliu, 2023).

A process that international entities use to develop sphere of influence in foreign states through communication, public diplomacy targets citizens and the public with messages and campaigns strategically designed (Entman, 2008; Gilboa, 2016). According to Saliu (2023), there are three primary tactics used by nation-states: information management, strategic communication, and cultural diplomacy. Information management refers to the volume of information provided to foreign audiences with a blueprint of daily media bombardment and control (Gilboa, 2016; Saliu, 2023). Strategic communication is a method of calculated and planned information distribution tactics at advantageous times and with targeted messages (Saliu, 2023). Cultural diplomacy refers to a designed set of interactions with a foreign audience with the purpose of cultivating a positive association (Saliu, 2023). Entities that enact public diplomacy strategies may focus on educational and informational entertainment to influence, possibly even persuade, international audiences (Cull, 2009).

The potential effect of a successful public diplomacy communication strategy is that the foreign public is so influenced by the messaging that foreign governments must respond to growing social pressure (Saliu, 2023). By introducing or furthering ideology with an agenda through media, nation-states can deploy public diplomacy efforts to disrupt, coalesce, sway, agitate, inspire, or ignite public discourse on issues of national and global importance. As political memes continue to proliferate and maintain virality in the digital messaging habits of Americans, foreign actors may be engaging in public diplomacy techniques of meme-making to influence the public on candidates, ideological beliefs, and policies. Russian interests in

American politics through social media accounts have already been uncovered in previous electoral cycles, even building personas and perceived authenticity by posting benign content over a significant period of time before transitioning to political issues (Walter, Ophir, & Jamieson, 2020).

Soft power is interrelated with public diplomacy. While public diplomacy refers to the process by which a nation-state might design an influential communication plan, soft power represents the values that a country might possess that would be attractive to a foreign state and its people (Saliu, 2023). Countries build public diplomacy strategies to exert soft power and inform foreign publics (Saliu, 2023). Nye (2004) developed the term soft power and describes the concept as a nation's ability to avoid coercive measures to achieve a desired goal and instead do so through the attractiveness of a country's cultural strengths, ideology, and morality. The admiration of values, such as the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of the United States, by foreign states provides an opportunity for application of soft power and influence. While political memes may not be a directly influential source of applying soft power and public diplomacy, the open source nature of information on the internet could be leading to soft power declines (Saliu, 2023). International audiences can now use Google to research any politician or policy. Memes, especially political memes, can be crude and harsh rhetorical messages with derogatory text and images. As American political memes go viral and reach audiences beyond the borders of the United States, they are also carrying a perception of the politicians, policies, and ideals of the country. That could be influencing the attractiveness of the United States to foreign audiences and affecting America's soft power and public diplomacy potency.

2.5 Structures and Devices of Media

2.5.1 *Rhetorical Criticism*

Classic rhetorical criticism originated with Aristotle in ancient Greece and laid the foundation for the study and understanding of persuasion in communication practices (Farrell, 1976). From 350 B.C.E. until the 20th century, rhetorical criticism scholars throughout history considered only discourse as rhetoric. The scope of rhetoric, the recognition of rhetorical devices, and the range of rhetorical critique expanded significantly in the 1960s and 1970s as scholars began to broaden the definition and application of rhetoric beyond oratory and printed speech (Bitzer & Black, 1971; McKerrow, 2010). Bryant (1973) advanced the perspective that communication without language could hold rhetorical elements.

Contemporary rhetorical criticism accepted the versatility of rhetoric to adapt and evolve to the communication practices of the time (Ehninger, 1968). As human communication advanced from spoken word to written language to mass produced publications to instantaneous transmission and commercialization of imagery, the recognition of rhetorical devices and their persuasive capabilities rounded into focus for critics. Amongst scholars, rhetoric began to include the use of strategic symbology for the purpose of influence (Ehninger, 1972). Burke (1966) emphasized the natural responses human beings have to symbols and the use of language as symbolic by rhetors. He argued for rhetorical analysis of all symbols, not just words, including music, performance, art, design, and even mathematics (Burke, 1974). McGee (1978) furthered the concept of the persuasive power of rhetoric in shaping world views. Wander (1983) introduced ideological perspectives by marking the systemic and structural forces that engage in rhetoric and the necessary role of critics to understand how rhetorical messages convey belief systems.

2.5.2 *Visual Rhetoric*

This extension of rhetorical critique and recognition of new rhetorical perspectives led to a flowering of academic exploration in rhetoric studies, including visual rhetoric (McKerrow, 2010). Rhetorical scholars argued that discursive messages and meanings could be manifested through visual imagery (Brummett, 1991), not limited to traditional expressions like artwork or photography, but also landscaping, urban environments, architecture, and industrial design (Brown, 1983). A shift towards rhetorical analysis of the visual world opened critics to explore the rhetorical properties of symbols that affect humans' daily lives (Foss, 1994). The visual image is pervasive in the modern media environment. Advertisements, television programs, digital videos, graphic design, movies, virtual worlds, video games, internet memes, and countless other visual mediums are rhetorical environments that rival the cultural significance of speeches and printed word of the past (Foss, 2005). Foss (2005) posited that the era of speeches as primary rhetorical symbols of the culture has passed.

For a visual image to be considered visual rhetoric, there are three markers rhetoricians must identify according to Foss (2005). The image must have symbolic properties, have been intervened on by humans, and be built and presented purposefully to an audience. An image cannot just serve as a sign to be considered visual rhetoric but must be symbolic. Foss (2005) uses the example of a stop sign. The hexagonal shape and the red color of a stop sign do not have a natural relationship to traffic rules requiring a complete stop. A human intervened to create an arbitrary shape and color to represent a traffic regulation which relays a purpose of safety to the audience, in this case automobile drivers. The functionality of the stop sign is an example of a rhetor arranging a visual element not for self-expression, but a utilitarian purpose (Foss, 2005).

As a perspective, visual rhetorical criticism focuses on the distinguishing features of a visual image and identifies the elements that are presented and the elements that are suggested, often through symbolic representation (Foss, 2005). Rhetorical scholars that study visual images may also examine the function or functions of an image (Foss, 2005). Purpose is the intended message or desire of the image creator, but the function of visual images refers to the action an image communicates regardless of the creator's intentions and motivations (Foss, 1994). Shapiro (1974) contended that an audience will decipher more meanings from an image than the individual that created the image. Foss (1994) added that images require interpretation from critics but cannot determine their own interpretations. Considering an analysis of political memes, these tenants of visual rhetoric are crucial to identifying rhetorical devices without the need to infer the purpose of the meme-maker. Instead, the memes can be examined from the perspective of the audience and an analysis of themes through the lens of framing techniques could lead to increased knowledge of how memes function as visual rhetoric in future studies.

2.5.3 Virtual Rhetoric

Foss's (1994, 2005) theory of visual rhetoric expanded the framework of visual rhetorical criticism and laid groundwork for inductive exploration of visual images to articulate symbols (Foss, 2005). However, scholars of rhetorical criticism have again had to adapt to an ever-increasing virtual world over the last two decades that has continued to push the boundaries of what is and what can be considered rhetoric. Seminal works on visual rhetoric express a move away from spoken and written forms as the cultural standard, but the digital age has provided the public with access to oratorical platforms. Video hosting websites like YouTube have expanded the reach of speeches like Ted Talks or panel discussions exponentially. Podcasts and blogs are innumerable in the modern digital landscape. Online communities foster fertile environments to

write op-eds, poetry, manifestos, and all manner of rhetorical pieces with the possibility of building and maintaining a following. The source of the data selection for this study was Reddit – a community entirely built on a culture of discourse and with groups dedicated to persuasive messaging. Political memes are nestled squarely in the virtual universe of communication and rhetoric.

As espoused by Ehninger (1968), rhetoric and the subsequent criticism of rhetorical works has adapted to the age of digital media. Virtual rhetoric has emerged as a perspective to investigate, examine, and identify rhetoric in digital and virtual environments. Prior to the proliferation of the world wide web, visual rhetoric often referred to tangible, actual, and real items with rhetorical symbols – a magazine advertisement, a photograph, billboards, architecture, sculpture, or artwork (Brummett, 1991). Virtual rhetoric initially pushed three-dimensional, tangible works containing symbols into a digital world of two dimensions (Jenkins, 2014), only to experience an expansion of the virtual world into three dimensions in a short period of time. To illustrate the difference in visual and virtual rhetoric, consider Foss’s (2005) example of the stop sign. In the non-virtual world, the symbology of a stop sign serves a function to represent an agreed upon societal rule to ensure the safety of drivers. In a virtual world, the exact same set of symbols can lose function. For instance, in the *Grand Theft Auto* video games, the game designers put in stop signs in the virtual world to replicate the experience of the actual world. However, the virtual world does not operate by the same rules as the actual world and stop signs are ignored by gamers. The visual rhetoric of stop signs crumble without function in the virtual world.

Memes, and by extension political memes, are formed from rhetorical devices. Text, imagery, and symbols are key components meme-makers use to deliver messages. However,

there is some debate on when a meme can be identified as virtual rhetoric. Jenkins (2014) argued that for a meme to be considered virtual rhetoric, a meme must elevate to the level of mode. To ascend to a mode, a meme must circulate and earn the collective meaning and adopted use of the audience instead of representing the interests of the meme creators and rhetors (Jenkins, 2014). The purpose of this study was not to designate a singular meme or memetic template as a form of virtual rhetoric, but to investigate the themes and rhetorical devices used by meme-makers which may be part of persuasive framing techniques to deliver messages. However, an understanding of rhetorical perspective is critical to identifying the devices of a rhetor and meme creator to further the study of visual and virtual rhetoric of political memes.

2.5.4 Framing and Rhetorical Analysis

The theoretical concept of framing is an accepted scholarly approach when applied to the traditional mass media channels of television, print journalism, film, radio, and advertisements. Two perspectives emerged in early framing research to conceptualize frames, psychological and sociological. Kahneman and Tversky (1984) proposed a psychological approach where information presented to an audience in a gain (or positive) versus loss (or negative) manner. Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2017) asserted that people's contextualization of information affects how humans make choices and that framing references the variation of presentation. For instance, an advertisement that presents a product as having a 25 percent discount will be contextualized by audiences as a good deal rather than delivering the same message as 75 percent of full price for the same product. A differing perspective on framing emerged from Goffman (1974), rooted in sociology. Goffman (1974) asserted that framing is an organizational filtering process that humans utilize to construct meaning and make sense of the world (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002). This conception of framing focuses on the selected words,

images, phrases, and styles of a message that is conveyed to an audience and how the frame might influence an individual or group.

Framing, in both the psychological and sociological perspectives, is an organizing principle to apply meaning and suggest the essence of a particular issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). The process of framing selects aspects of a collective and perceived reality and assigns increased importance in the communication of a text or image in a manner that draws attention to, highlights, or promotes a specific viewpoint (Entman, 1993). Media framing has traditionally been rooted in the sociological perspective and has focused on mass media and journalists' intentional selection or emphasis on certain aspects, details, themes, or imagery when presenting an issue or event to an audience (Chen, Rochon, & Anderson, 2022). This process results in the formulation of media frames.

Frame theory applied to media provides scholars with a theoretical approach for analyzing how media channels present and portray news to audiences as well as how audiences perceive, interpret, and deconstruct those messages (Ross & Rivers, 2019). Nisbet (2009) posited that any information passed on from one person to another, by any means, has been framed. In traditional mass media, the audience consumes news and information purely in the form, fit, and relevance based on the presentation that has been designed by media agencies. According to Ross and Rivers (2019), at no point does information pass from media to consumer without subjective interpretation, which allows for journalists, editors, and other mass media content decision-makers to manufacture influential media frames.

Media frames exist to accentuate the salience of, or specific aspects of, a topic (de Vreese, 2005). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) mapped out the framing process, breaking down

the packages that media creators and elite global influencers use to present issues to an audience. A package can include symbology, metaphorical language and representation, arguments, strategic and calculated usage of imagery, and information that can be new, old, assumed, or repositioned. These packages are customized to an issue and give structure and context to a centralized narrative or idea. The frame connects the centralized idea and unfolding events and gives the presentation of information meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

According to Goffman (1974), the application of frames by individuals presenting information is assistive in the processing and intake of new information and allows receivers to fit new information into categories. An effective media frame provides the audience with information that makes sense within the surrounding culture and the associated meanings of that culture (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Termed “cultural resonance” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) or “narrative fidelity” (Snow & Benford, 1988), frames are dependent on relevance within society. Van Gorp (2010) noted that culturally embedded frames are attractive for journalists because the narrative elements are already in place. By appealing to established belief structures and cultural norms, a frame that is culturally embedded can seem natural to an audience (Van Gorp, 2010).

2.5.4.1 Framing Effects

The effects of framing, particularly media framing, have been fertile grounds for research. There is no shortage of audiences, mediums, and delivery modes and systems to study, especially when considering Nisbet’s (2009) perspective that any information sharing act is subject to a frame. When text, visuals, messages, or other communication elements are linked to specific beliefs, concepts, or interpretive information, there is a framing effect (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). The spectrum of a framing effect is vast. A frame can produce the desired and

intentional effect for the architect of the message, but a frame can also be interpreted and received by an audience in a way that was unintentional, even undesired, by the architect (Ross & Rivers, 2019). Frames in news have considerable influence on audience's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). The audience consumes the information, through the applied frame, and can be affected, potentially altering the understanding of an issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987).

Lecheler and de Vreese (2019) noted that a fundamental premise of framing effects research is the capacity of news frames to affect how audiences think about issues. In a study that investigated how frames can promote specific thoughts, de Vreese (2004) found that recipients of framed media messages on the issue of enlarging the European Union responded to frame elements and not central, non-framed news facts. This finding strengthened the argument that news media framing effects influence the way audiences think (de Vreese, 2004).

Internet memes use imagery and information that are designed to associate conceptual messages with language selection, image selection, colors, text placement, text emphasis, and humor deployed as rhetorical devices. Similar to how memes rise to salience and virality, societal elites and journalists adopt different media frames and interpretative informational delivery patterns due to resonance in popular culture (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2013).

2.5.4.2 Memes, Framing, and Rhetorical Devices

The creation and enjoyment of internet memes and the blending of meme culture with mainstream digital media consumption habits has expanded the reach of meme content exponentially in the last decade. As content generated by users, internet memes are powerful delivery modules for political commentary, satirical messaging, and issue debate, often conveyed

via humor. Social media sites disperse and proliferate news and information in a digital ripple effect and memes ride the waves with the lowest technological threshold of a few clicks for creation, repurposing, and sharing. The prevalence of news information distributed on and through social media platforms and as content for internet memes validates the revision of framing perspectives within the context of this new method of information delivery (Ross & Rivers, 2019). Rhetorical devices are essential to framing techniques and frame elements used by meme-makers. Themes of meme messages may assist in the construction of frames and virtual rhetoric.

In scholarly research, news frames and framing perspectives have traditionally been studied from the standpoint of the mass media, with journalists and news agencies determining the emphasized elements of a story or message (Ross & Rivers, 2019). A community of meme creators can include societal actors at any level, from traditional newsmakers that might seek to capitalize on a memes' social currency and cultural value to grassroots activists seeking to counter the framing techniques and perspectives of mass media agenda-setters. Any individual internet user with access to meme-making tools has the power and autonomy to create a potentially influential political meme, thus wielding the capacity to select and emphasize information.

Rhetorical analysis delves into the decision-making process of communicators in the selection of language and other symbols with the intention of shaping an audience's interpretation (Tella, 2015). Rhetorical techniques are utilized by communicators to direct attention to an issue or message by identifying thematic elements and assigning those elements to social actors or situations (Kuypers, Cooper, & Althouse, 2008). Political memes are rich with

rhetorical elements, often designed with specific intent to feature persuasive topics of general political discourse.

2.6 The Current Study

In digital communities centered on political affiliation, image macro memes surface instantaneously and in real-time with current events, advancing narratives about prominent American politicians, issues, foreign policy, and domestic policy (Denisova, 2019; Nee & De Maio, 2019). In February of 2022, the Russian Federation initiated a military campaign against Ukraine that has continued for nearly two years. The conflict immediately sparked online discourse and internet memes were prominent in the messaging practices in online forums across the globe (Miller, 2022). In the United States, discussion focused on the American perspective of open war in Europe and internet memes formed with content featuring American politicians as central figures and United States policy, foreign and domestic, as critical thematic elements. The meme creation process allowed meme-makers and audiences to advance and participate in online discourse about political issues and events from the global political theater (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016). Memes are deeply intertwined with political messaging in the western world (Nee & De Maio, 2019) with capability to align audiences (Dean, 2019). In a digital participatory culture, memes represent an ingress that can lead to political conversations (Denisova, 2019).

Ideology can fuel the political meme construction process. In the United States, American conservative ideology is aligned with the Republican Party and memes generated for Republican audiences reflect a conservative worldview. Minutes after news broke of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, memes espousing American conservative beliefs in relation to political and societal issues in the United States were posted on r/ConservativeMemes. The memes centered around gun control, socialism, masking policy, woke culture, domestic riots, globalism, and Democratic

opposition. American liberal ideology and social democracy are cornerstones of the Democratic Party in the United States (Bell & Stanley, 2012) and was evident in the topics of memes shared on r/PoliticalMemes. The defense of moral and human rights and globalist policy were referenced in the memes, but also disparagement of the political opposition and the right-wing, conservative population.

In each online community, memes target and emphasize extremist views of political rivals. In these instances, meme-makers created messages with distinct themes. The meme-makers generated content by determining the image, text, humor, and tone of each meme. Meme-makers are incorporating political narratives and strategy into memes (Dean, 2019). In the memes pulled from the two Reddit communities, political actors and tacticians such as Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy were featured consistently. Issues in traditional news media focus on platforms, policies, and social challenges (Rhee, 1997) and are also topic selections and thematic fuel for meme-makers in the political arena.

In a digital participatory culture, where there is little definition between audience and content creators (Ross & Rivers, 2017) and the sender also has the power to be the receiver of messages, the themes and rhetorical devices of meme-making practices requires investigation. To the knowledge of this researcher, scholarly work analyzing memetic themes and rhetorical elements of meme-making is lacking in new media such as social media platforms.

In the week following the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war, 126 internet memes were collected from politically affiliated online discussion forums on the website www.reddit.com. Two Reddit communities were identified, the subreddits r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes. r/ConservativeMemes is a community with more than 55,900 subscribers and users that identify as politically conservative in the United States and hosts memes that

promote conservative ideologies or disparage non-conservative ideologies. r/PoliticalMemes is a liberal-leaning online discussion forum with more than 21,500 subscribers. r/PoliticalMemes allows the posting of political memes of all ideologies, but the majority of the contributors are moderate, liberal, or leftist in political ideology. The memes analyzed for this study were collected during the first seven days of the conflict on each of these subreddit sites. The memes were then filtered for subject-matter to represent only memes that reference American politicians or policy in relation to the Ukrainian-Russian war. The analysis of these memes addressed the following research questions:

R1: What themes emerged from the memes posted by conservative and liberal users in relation to American politicians and issues?

R2: What rhetorical devices are meme-makers using to deliver messages to audiences in memes sparked by the Ukrainian-Russian war?

Analyzing the themes used in the build and design of conservative and liberal political internet memes will further the knowledge of meme creation techniques while simultaneously shedding light on the rhetorical elements of political memetic content. Identifying the themes present in political internet memes will provide insight into the similarities and differences of persuasive and information emphasis tactics used by meme-makers. This will lead to a richer understanding of spread of information in a participatory digital culture and the stature of internet memes within the American political machine.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview

The research conducted in this study was a qualitative contrast comparative analysis. The political memes collected from the Reddit communities r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes were examined and analyzed to identify themes and rhetorical devices in memes posted in the seven days following the February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The first part of the study codified the memes into thematic categories to determine themes used by meme-makers and disseminated by meme audiences in these two digital, political communities. A secondary directive of the study was the examination of rhetorical devices and elements that meme-makers used to emphasize messages, entertain audiences, maintain literacy, build frames, and increase virality. A compare and contrast approach was used to examine the similarities and differences in the thematic elements in meme-making among conservative and liberal internet meme communities.

An analysis of themes present in political meme-sharing communities is necessary to catalog and categorize political ideologies. Memes are powerful tools that deliver bite-size messages with the potential to alter an audience's perception on a subject or issue (Shifman, 2014b). A thematic analysis examined subjects, topics, and characters used by meme-makers to compose messages to American audiences. Rhetorical devices used by meme-makers were also noted. The analyzed themes and rhetorical devices were then compared and contrasted between the two communities.

3.2 Selection of Data

The data analyzed in this study were internet memes posted on the Reddit communities, r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes in the seven days that following Russia's military

endeavor into Ukraine on February 24. Reddit is a network of online discussion forums dedicated to topic boards for interests, hobbies, and passions (Reddit, n.d.). Forums are designated by the “r/” in the website address followed by the topic and are called “subreddits.” A platform influenced and moderated by users, Reddit is positioned as a social media site that embraces discourse and engagement amongst the community and is not designed for marketing, content creation, or branding initiatives (Bump, 2022). In 2022, Reddit boasted 430 million active users each month and was the fifth-most visited site in the United States for web traffic (Bump, 2022).

In the week after the Ukraine-Russia war began on February 24, 126 memes were collected from posts on the subreddit communities of r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes for selection in this study. At the time the memes were documented, r/ConservativeMemes had 55,900 subscribers and the subreddit was created for users that identify as politically conservative. r/PoliticalMemes was a liberal-leaning subreddit with more than 21,500 subscribers at the time the data was collected. r/PoliticalMemes allows the posting of political memes of all ideologies, but the majority of the contributors post moderate, liberal, or leftist political memes. The selected political memes for study from both subreddit communities were part of an initial filtering process. The selected memes met the following criteria:

1. The text language had to be in English.
2. The subject-matter had to reference United States policy or politicians in relation to the Ukrainian-Russian war.

For instance, a meme with subject-matter of the one-year anniversary of the January 6 conflict at the United States capitol in 2021 was not included in the selection of data for analysis, even when posted on the subreddit during the seven-day collection period.

In the r/ConservativeMemes subreddit, 95 memes were selected and represented the criteria required. In the r/PoliticalMemes subreddit, 31 memes were selected and represented the criteria required.

3.3 Meme Thematic Analysis: Coding Scheme and Procedure

3.3.1 Meme Thematic Analysis: Coding Scheme

To properly extract themes from political internet memes posted on the two subreddit communities, each meme was individually examined in detail to identify message structure, presentation, topics, subjects, and language that contribute to a theme. The study analyzed each element of the meme including the visual imagery, color scheme, symbols, and rhetoric. Through an inductive process, a coding scheme developed to categorize political memes.

3.3.2 Meme Thematic Analysis: Procedure

The memes collected from r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes were thoroughly analyzed by the researcher to determine themes. The themes were compared and contrasted, focusing on key differences and similarities in memes designed to resonate with each audience. The frequency of specific themes present in each community's memes were indicators of the salience of an issue, topic, or ideology for meme-makers and their audiences. The establishment of a core group of themes for each audience is critical to the analysis of the frames in the selected set of memes in the second section of this study.

The researcher did not conduct a reliability check for this study. Firstly, the research endeavored without partnership and there was no availability for additional research participants. Secondly, memes are inherently context dependent. Political memes often have layered meanings and the qualitative, inductive approach for this study embraced the organic exploration

of themes. A traditional method of checking for reliability would have required additional resources and time that was unavailable to the researcher.

3.3.3 Identification of Rhetorical Devices

The text and imagery of the memes were investigated to ascertain the rhetorical devices that can be signature elements of a frame (Gamson & Lasch, 1983). These elements or devices (Linström & Marais, 2012) can be used to frame issues, stories, or events. Examples of elements that were identified as rhetorical devices were metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, and depictions (Gamson & Lasch, 1983) and technical devices such as text, quotes, sources, or images (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2003). In line with Milner's (2016) notation of meme information, the technical and rhetorical devices did not need to be factual, credible, or accurate to be investigated.

4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.1 Overview

In the inductive analysis of 126 memes posted to the subreddit communities of r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes, five distinct themes emerged in the conservative community, three distinct memes were identified in the liberal community, and two themes were detected in both conservative and liberal communities. Among conservative memes, there were five distinct themes: ineptitude; weakness; fear-mongering; corruption; and delusion. For liberal memes, there were three distinct themes: puppets and sympathizers; heroic leadership; and submissive through sex. The themes of hypocrisy and spin were evident themes in both conservative and liberal communities, but with contrasting subthemes and topic areas addressed by meme-makers.

4.2 Conservative Themes

A total of seven themes were identified in the sample of 95 memes from the r/ConservativeMemes subreddit community. These conservative themes are reported in Table 4.1

Table 4.1: Themes from Conservative Memes

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Ineptitude	28	29.47%
Weakness	18	18.95%
Hypocrisy	12	12.63%
Fear-Mongering	10	10.53%
Corruption	9	9.47%
Spin	9	9.47%
Delusion	5	5.26%

4.2.1 Ineptitude

The theme of ineptitude was pervasive in conservative memes and focused messaging around the incompetence and incapability of Democratic leaders. The theme of ineptitude was often present in memes that denounced and questioned the mental faculties of President Joe Biden, but also targeted liberal audiences and supporters for policy or advocacy of liberal issues. Identified in 29.47% of the selection, conservative memes with the theme of ineptitude portrayed Democratic leaders as oblivious and imbecilic. Figure 4.1 is an example of a meme that painted Biden as a simpleton that required a list and reminders to keep information concealed. However, throughout the list, the meme-maker sprinkled in entries that demean Biden and reference conservative criticisms of the legitimacy of his presidency and public trust in his son. Figure 4.2 is a meme that targeted Democratic congressperson Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez and portrayed her as dim-witted and blindly taking a stance. The meme-maker utilized a play on words to depict Ocasio-Cortez as an official simply supporting a cause without employing critical thought or requiring accurate information.

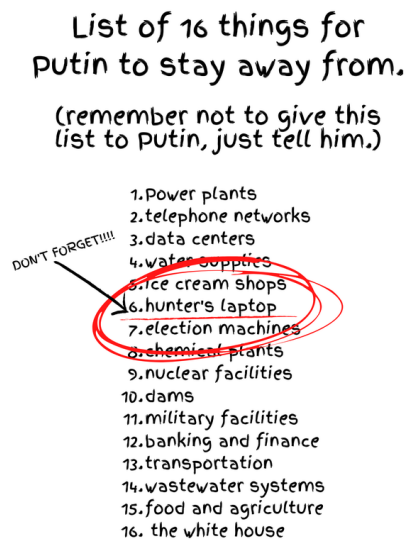


Figure 4.1: Joe Biden's list



Figure 4.2: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez stands with you, crane!

Biden was the focus of heavy criticism in conservative memes. He was often portrayed as senile, unfit, stupid, and his seat of power in the United States was a cause for Russia's military actions. In comparisons to Putin, Biden was represented as the lesser of the two, especially regarding intelligence. The meme in Figure 4.3 directly addressed the persistent theming of Biden's ineptitude on the global stage with the suggestion that the President of the United States will commit a serious and severe blunder that will aid Russian efforts. The meme questioned Biden's military aptitude and overall ability to act in a crisis.

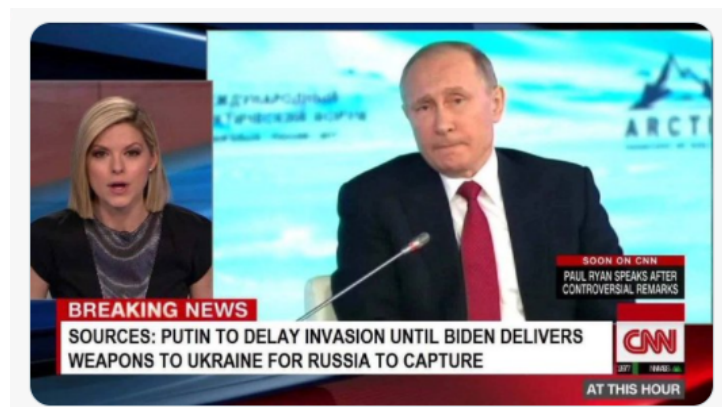


Figure 4.3: Putin delays invasion

Liberal policies and ideologies were cast as uninformed and unintelligent. Conservative memes used messages of ineptitude to imply a link between domestic and global issues in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Democratic leaders in power in the United States. Biden’s sanctions against Russia were viewed as ineffective by conservative meme-makers. Tied to the domestic issue of rising gasoline prices, Biden’s policies were chastised by memes predicting sanctions will hurt Americans’ wallets more than the Russian government.

Memes with themes of ineptitude were often connected to messages of presidential comparison between Biden and former President Donald Trump. A persistent subtheme, memes of presidential comparison focused on Putin’s actions when Democrats were in office. Figure 4.4 was an example of the logic used by conservative meme-makers to illustrate liberal ineptitude. A shared screenshot of a post from a well-known right-wing user on social media, the meme text provided a succinct, non-contextual snapshot of Putin’s aggressive actions in Ukraine while Democrats held power in the United States. The comparison of presidents, and by extension political affiliations, projected Trump as a competent leader that was worthy of representing the global interest of the United States.

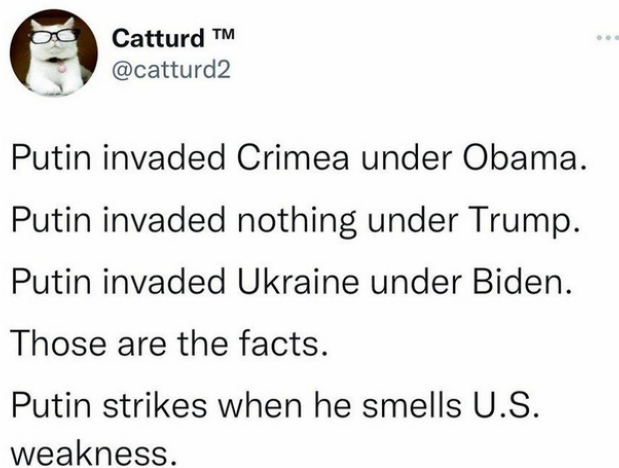


Figure 4.4: Catturd

4.2.2 Weakness

Memetic themes of ineptitude were often coupled with heavy themes of weakness. The weakness theme was evident in memes with direct or symbolic imagery of Democratic leaders as scrawny, infantile, confused, or debilitated. Memes with themes of weakness often juxtaposed two characters with one as clearly docile or in a powerless position. The two themes of weakness and ineptitude overlapped in many data selections but were distinct because memes of ineptitude portrayed liberals as incapable leaders due to mental capacity whereas memes of weakness focused on frailty and a lack of bravado. Of analyzed memes, 18.95% were identified with themes of weakness. In this selection of memes, Biden and other Democratic officials were illustrated as scared of Putin and Russian authoritarianism.

Biden was cast as a wimpy or nerdy child and even as a helpless infant. Figure 4.5 labeled Biden as a pre-teen, undeveloped weakling male in a popular memetic template. In the meme community, the young boy flexing is used to designate a subject as a paper tiger. The meme suggested that the subject, in this case Biden, was incapable of intimidating a more dangerous force and was viewed as a non-threat by Putin and Russia.



Figure 4.5: Scrawny kid

Similar to the ineptitude category, weakness memes were loaded with heavy presidential comparisons between Trump, Biden, Republican policies, and Democratic policies. Trump was characterized as strong, brave, vigilant in the face of oppositional power, and a pillar of masculinity. He was even presented as a leader with superhero-like qualities whereas Biden is shown as a soft negotiator, a passive policymaker, and averse to confrontation. Figure 4.6 represented a meme with Trump hailed as the savior. The silhouette of Trump was positioned in the sky akin to the Bat Signal, which beckoned Batman in comic books and television shows when Gotham City was in an hour of need.

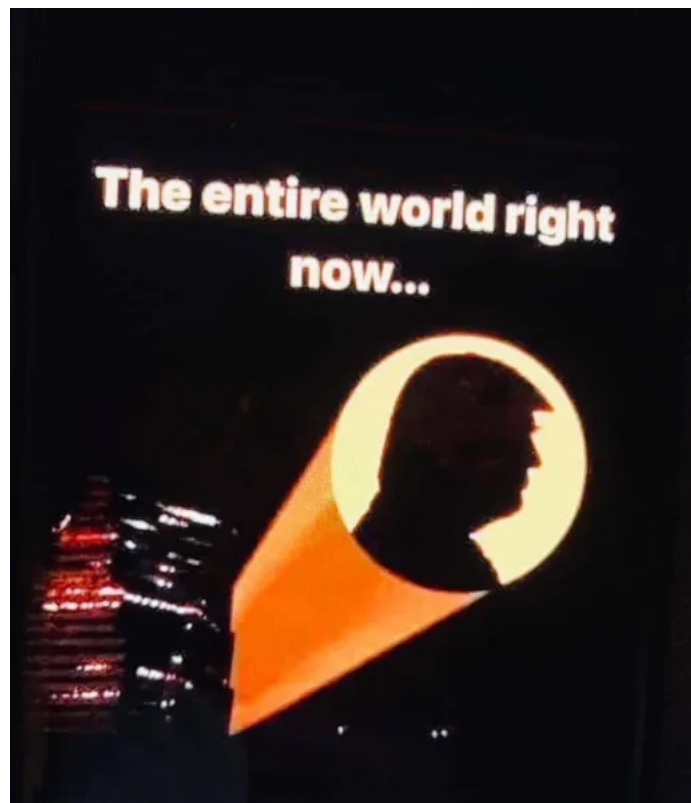


Figure 4.6: Trump Bat Signal

4.2.3 Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy was a theme detected in both conservative and liberal audiences. The hypocrisy theme was identified in memes that used messages and information to show the

hypocritical stances of the opposition. In the selection analyzed from r/ConservativeMemes, hypocrisy was labeled as a theme in 12.63%. Meme-makers focused on pointing out hypocritical stances of liberal lawmakers and leaders when contrastingly applied to domestic and foreign issues. Democratic policies on the COVID-19 pandemic, the second amendment, and international sanctions were central arguments for meme-makers to point out hypocritical philosophies of liberals in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Figure 4.7 illustrated a conservative meme-maker's efforts to connect a global issue with domestic policy by comically alluding to the rigidity of COVID-19 masking guidelines and mandates even in situations of nuclear fallout. In Figure 4.8, the meme used a leftist social media account to justify a hypocritical position. The meme repurposed a post from the Occupy Democrats account that supported the government arming of Ukrainians, but the meme-maker provided a perceived American liberal stance that Democrats opposed arming the public and that there was no need for high-powered firearms to be available to non-military citizens. Memes with strong thematic messages of hypocrisy painted American liberal ideology as flawed and unsubstantial while also seeding doubts of trust, genuineness, and the credibility Democratic leaders.

CDC: Don't forget your mask during a nuclear attack!
People who listen to the CDC:



Figure 4.7: Mask in a nuclear attack

Leftoids: You don't need an automatic rifle, do you honestly think you can fend off an oppressive regime that has vastly superior fire power with small arms?

Also leftoids:



Figure 4.8: Leftoid hypocrisy

4.2.4 Fear-Mongering

Conservative memes employed callbacks to controversial COVID-19 policies and on the restriction of firearms to also instill fear of government overreach. The fear-mongering theme played to right-wing conspiracy theories that espoused a liberal desire and agenda to mold a dormant, collectivist society. Identifiers for the fear-mongering theme were images or language that presented the United States as unstable, unsafe, or unwilling to protect individual rights and represented a message of necessity for action to protect civil liberties, such as the right to bear firearms. Additionally, the fear-mongering theme emerged from memes that referenced the conflict as the opening salvo of World War III. Following the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, 10.53% of the memes collected contained thematic threads of fear-mongering.

Figure 4.9 used the invasion of Ukraine as a vindication for the second amendment and the necessity for high-powered weapons. Figure 4.10 repurposed photography from domestic riots after protests in the United States as a comparison point for the violence in Ukraine. The meme-maker was using a globally relevant event to tap into the collective societal consciousness of the United States and linked riotous behavior that is often credited to liberal-leaning groups by conservatives.

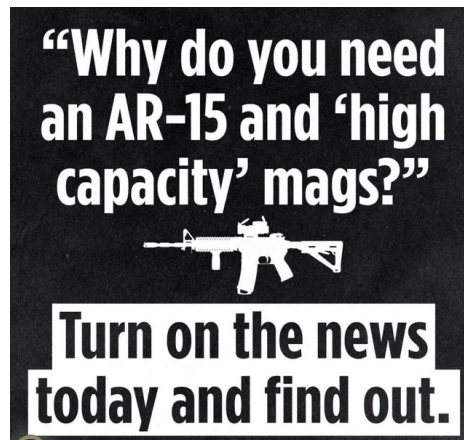


Figure 4.9: Turn on the news

Shocking picture of Kiev after being Bombed by Russia.

Just kidding this is a peaceful protest in America.

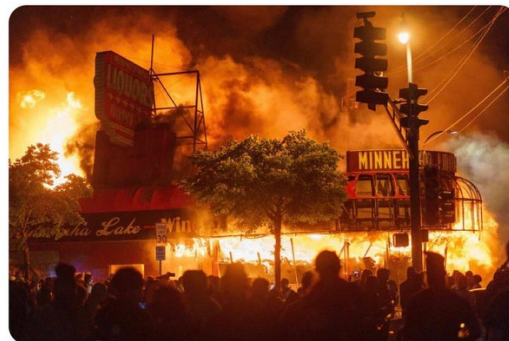


Figure 4.10: Peaceful protest in America

Conservative meme-makers unfurled messages to American audiences that the threat of invasion or the need for self-defense was real. Memes with themes of fear-mongering tied closely with the themes of ineptitude and weakness. Meme-makers used a perceived lack of strength or mental capability in Democratic leaders like Biden to present the United States and western civilization as vulnerable to tyranny.

4.2.5 Corruption

Memes that portrayed the left as criminal, conspirators, and greedy fed a theme of corruption in conservative memes posted in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The corruption theme emerged in memes that remixed and perpetuated controversial news items, scandals, and allegations of prominent political figures that involved immoral, unethical, or criminal activity. Democratic leaders in the memes were accused of abusing power and in a position of overreaching control. Corruption themes were detected in 9.47% of conservative memes and often cast Democrats as using their political station and power to help themselves or family members. The Biden family was consistently mentioned with messages that referenced Hunter Biden's ties to Ukraine and his past of using narcotics. Figure 4.11 alluded to a Hunter Biden connection to Ukraine in which he received large sums of money and the imagery suggested that the conflict will dissolve that relationship and he will return to narcotic use. Joe Biden was the target in Figure 4.12. The meme set up President Biden as perturbed that he would no longer be able to continue laundering money in Ukraine.

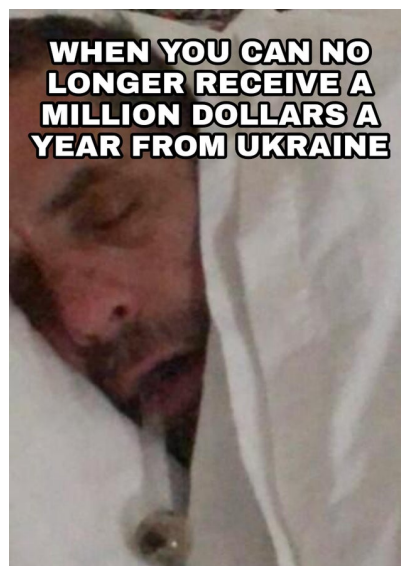


Figure 4.11: Laundering Hunter



Figure 4.12: Laundering Joe

4.2.6 Spin

Spin appeared as a theme in both conservative and liberal data selections but was central to conservative memes that reflected positions of the mainstream media. The spin theme was identified when a meme-maker desired to call out a politician's or news media outlet's bias, agenda, slant, or manipulation of a story or information. A theme of liberal bias and a leftist agenda was commonly attributed to how media covers global events in conservative memes. Characterized as untrustworthy and accused of agenda-setting, the mainstream media in memes with a spin theme were viewed as mouth pieces for the Democratic Party and globalist endeavors. Spin was detected in 9.47% of conservative memes analyzed.

The meme in Figure 4.13 used a popular memetic template to point out the media's slant towards the Democrats. The meme-maker labeled the continued road on the highway as "Blame Biden" suggesting that is the most sensible path for a vehicle. The car is labeled as media and underneath were the topics of the media cycle. The swerving car towards the off-ramp labeled "Blame Russia" illustrated the conservative view that the mainstream media refused to blame Biden for domestic issues.



Figure 4.13: *Blame Biden, blame Russia*

4.2.7 Delusion

The final theme evident in conservative memes dealt with messages that chastised cancel culture and wokeness – portraying liberals as delusional. The delusion theme was identified in conservative memes that targeted sociological and ideological differences between liberals and conservatives. Conservative memes with the delusion theme appeared in 5.26% of the data selection and depicted liberals as ineffective and slacktivist. Attacking wokeness, the memes suggested that Americans that embraced progressivism, political correctness, and inclusivity in juxtaposition to global issues of conflict and violence are deluded. Figure 4.14 is an example of a conservative meme-maker that used cancel culture as a punchline. The meme message focused on the lack of real-world consequences of social media or digital activism. A canceled Russian soldier will do nothing to prevent violence between two nations.

This woman have been going around and single handedly canceled 32 Russians from Twitter in Kyiv and has been named “the woke of Kyiv”



Figure 4.14: Woke of Kyiv

4.3 Liberal Themes

A total of five themes were identified in the sample of 31 memes from the liberal r/PoliticalMemes subreddit community. These liberal themes are reported in Table 4.2

Table 4.2: Themes from Liberal Memes

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Puppets & sympathizers	12	38.71%
Heroic leadership	5	16.13%
Hypocrisy	5	16.13%
Submissive through sex	4	12.90%
Spin	3	9.68%

4.3.1 Puppets & Sympathizers

The most prevalent theme among liberal memes were portrayals of Republican and right-wing leaders as puppets and sympathizers of the Russian regime. This theme was detected in

38.71% of memes from r/PoliticalMemes and often depicted conservative leaders as mouthpieces for Putin. The puppets and sympathizers theme identifiers included symbolic and rhetorical elements that associated Republicans with Russia, documented quotes from Republican leaders that appeared to soft criticisms or even support of Russia, and heavily edited scenes of Republican leaders and Putin in close physical and ideological proximity.

Figure 4.15 displayed imagery of Trump simplistically supporting the idea of violent conflict, but also in league with Putin as his puppeteer. In many memes, Putin was cast as the strategist and the person pulling the strings on Trump's stances, words, and actions. Trump was hapless, unintelligent, and boorish in these depictions whereas Putin was reviled, he was also gifted a sense of power, reach, and influence intended to frighten the audience.



Figure 4.15: Do the war

Conservative personalities and leaders were characterized as sympathetic to Russian interests and meme-makers utilized strongly suggestive, often overt phrasing of corruption and political alignment with authoritarianism. Figure 4.16 was a doctored image of then FOX News

personality Tucker Carlson surrounded by two Russian flags and the lower third reading “Comrade Carlson.” This illustrated the meme-maker’s desire to paint Carlson’s views as sympathetic to the Russian cause. Carlson was the target of other memes and was depicted as a media puppet for Putin for seemingly pro-Russian stances espoused on his television program.



Figure 4.16: Comrade Carlson

4.3.2 Heroic Leadership

A theme of liberal memes from the selection portrayed actions of world leaders, like Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as heroes. The heroic leadership theme emerged from liberal memes that propped up Democratic and Ukrainian world leaders and used rhetorical devices and language that portrayed them as daring, cool, noble, and valiant. Liberal memes that referenced the bravery and courageousness of Biden and Zelenskyy in opposition to Putin accounted for 16.13% the memes analyzed. In Figure 4.17, Joe Biden’s meme alter ego, Dark Brandon, depicted Biden as the heroic figure the Russians did not want in the White House. The Dark Brandon persona was a subversive pull by liberal meme-makers to reappropriate the ‘Let’s go Brandon’ verbiage that conservatives adopted as a coded substitute for expressing ‘Fuck Joe Biden.’

The Russians went from having a puppet in the White House to this guy helping the Ukrainians beat that ass, bozhe moi doesn't even begin to describe it.

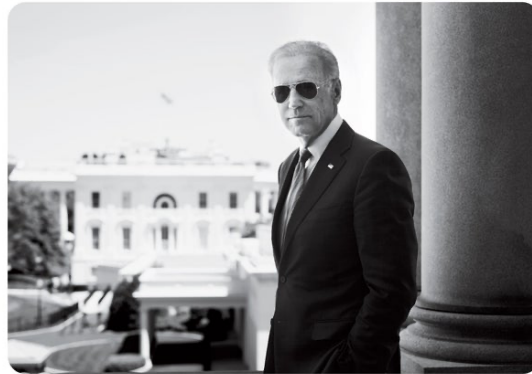


Figure 4.17: Dark Brandon

Figure 4.18 directly compared Zelenskyy with prominent Republican Ted Cruz. The image contrasted the differences by which the two elected officials lead. Zelenskyy was in full military gear and visible to the public as present and fearless in the face of the Russian advance. The image of Cruz was a previously viral photograph of the senator taking a flight to Cancun and leaving Texas during a winter weather storm in 2021 while his constituents experienced power outages. Liberal meme-makers created memes to chastise the leadership of individuals that represent authoritarianism, in their view, and exemplified democratic leadership.



Figure 4.18: Winter vacation

4.3.3 Hypocrisy

Memes with the theme of hypocrisy were evident in the analyzed section of liberal memes as well as conservative memes. The hypocrisy theme was identified in memes that used messages and information to show the hypocritical stances of the opposition. Liberal meme-makers juxtaposed conservative ideologies on domestic issues and foreign issues to relay messages of hypocrisy. This theme was evident in 16.13% of the selection and especially focused on libertarian stances on political and social issues. Figure 4.19 illustrated this method, suggesting that Republicans claim to advocate for the well-being of children when opposed to educational issues, but were silent when foreign powers committed war atrocities on innocents and children. The purpose of hypocrisy themed memes was to delegitimize the position of conservatives.



Figure 4.19: Drake hypocrisy 1

4.3.4 *Submissive through sex*

The portrayal of Donald Trump and conservatives as submissive to Putin and Russian interests through sexual imagery and language was present in liberal memes. Sexual acts, inferences, innuendo, and text were identifiers for the submissive through sex theme. Ranging from suggestive to explicit, conservative personalities were depicted as subservient to Putin. Trump, in particular, was degraded in these illustrations. The submissive through sex meme appeared in 12.9% of the liberal meme selection. Putin was often positioned behind Trump or with Trump kneeling. In these depictions, Putin was cast as the more masculine and dominant figure in the images. In Figure 4.20, only the top of Trump's head was visible and he was positioned at Putin's waist. The slang phrase 'simp harder' was used, which means to please a person or object of affection. The meme suggested that Trump was engaged in an oral sex act for Putin, thus symbolizing perceived support for Russia. Figure 4.21 has Putin placed behind Trump. The text again made a reference to oral sex as a show of dominance and made Trump appear as submissive through sex.

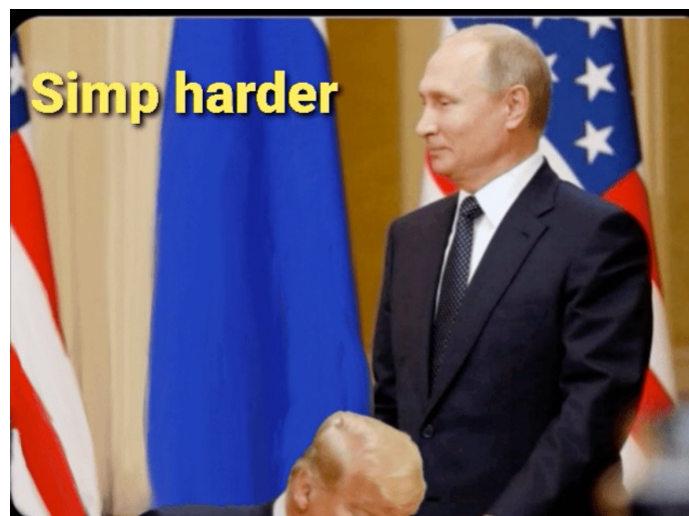


Figure 4.20: *Simp harder*



Figure 4.21: Putin puppets

4.3.5 *Spin*

Liberal memes with the spin theme had a slightly altered thematic quality than memes of the same theme for conservatives. Memes with spin posted to r/PoliticalMemes focused less on the mainstream media and more on Republicans spinning Democratic actions and policy to be perceived as negative by a conservative base. Spin themed memes took aim at the contrarian stances adopted by Republicans and emerged in 9.68% of liberal memes. Figure 4.22 used a popular memetic theme of a cartoon character sweating to choose between two buttons. In this instance, the meme-maker labeled the character as the Republican Party and they had difficulty choosing which opposing argument to Biden should be selected. Liberal meme-makers hinted at a Republican desire to sow division with pre-loaded critiques of the Democrats, regardless of the left's actual actions or policy.



Figure 4.22: Policy selection button

5 RHETORICAL DEVICES

5.1 Overview

In the analysis of the data selection for the identification of themes, the coding process relied on the rhetorical devices of meme-makers. The imagery, layout, format, text, color scheme, literary elements, presentation, and any other device contained within the meme was considered and documented in the investigation of political memes. The examination of rhetorical devices was essential to discovering the themes of the data selection. Through the coding and identification process, several distinct devices emerged as prominent rhetorical elements repeatedly used by meme-makers to compose political messages from r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes. Memetic templates, quotes, symbolism, inattentional blindness, and contradictions were rhetorical devices utilized by liberal and conservative meme creators in crafting influential messages about American politicians, domestic policies, social issues, and ideological groups.

5.2 Memetic Templates

The process of creating memes requires the makers to engage in the selection of rhetorical elements to mold and shape a persuasive message. The selection of subject, imagery, text, color scheme, and other elements that comprise a meme are part of the alteration and distribution of information to meme audiences. In the memetic templates, meme creators filter compositional elements through established meme templates to increase the virality and comprehension of a meme's message. There are thousands, if not millions, of memetic templates that circulate the digital media landscape with many achieving mainstream and collective societal familiarity within meme audiences. Jenkins' (2014) conception of a mode applies to these types of memes. Meme-makers from the two subreddit communities relied on memetic

templates to deliver political messages in a format that was recognizable, understood, and easily processed by meme audiences.

Memetic templates are used for familiarity and often employed imagery, references, and language from popular culture. Movie characters, superstar musicians, children's cartoons, seminal entertainment moments, and even nostalgic products, items, or experiences were all elements meme-makers utilized to craft and post political memes in these digital communities within the first week of the Ukrainian-Russia war. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 illustrated the usage of the same memetic template that appealed to both conservative and liberal audiences. The meme depicted hip-hop artist Drake rejecting one idea or statement and accepting another with freeze frames from a music video from 2015. Conservative meme-makers in Figure 5.1 used this template to craft a message of liberals supporting democracy as hypocritical because of the perception that Ukraine harbored a political party that aligned with fascist principles. In Figure 5.2, liberal meme-makers used the exact same memetic template to present a message that Republican priorities were morally corrupt for not wanting to focus on child deaths in the Ukrainian-Russian war, but rather the perceived opposition to white children learning about the history of slavery and racism. The same memetic template is used as a tool to display different and ideologically oppositional messages intended for each community's desired audience.

"We Support Democracy"



Figure 5.1: Drake hypocrisy 1



Figure 5.2: Drake hypocrisy 2

Layout, format, and presentational style are also instruments of memetic templates.

Meme creators from both conservative and liberal perspectives did not always use established or

modal meme templates. However, the formulaic approach of meme information was consistent in memes posted by the two communities. Layout is a powerful tool for memetic templating and allows for instant identification by users. A popular memetic layout is the four boxes. The message is intended to be consumed in successive pieces, moving from the upper left box to the upper right box, to the lower left box, to the lower right box. The layout delivers the punchline or intended message of the meme in the final box in the lower right. Figure 5.3 depicted this four-box layout. The meme-maker created a memetic template by designing a message that followed a formula recognizable by meme audiences to deliver a memetic message, but the imagery, text, order, and style appeared to be original to this meme. By placing the information in a familiar order that is indicative of meme creation practices, the creator increased the audiences' ability to decipher the information and comprehend the intended message.

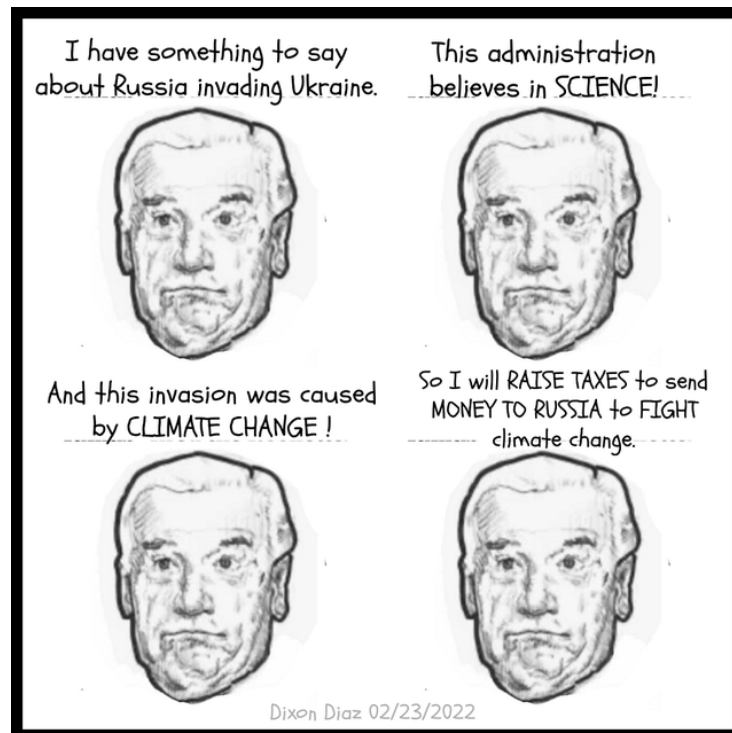


Figure 5.3: Quad Biden

The format of a meme is slightly different than layout. An image macro meme, where text is located on the top and on the bottom with an image in the middle, is an example of a meme format that is standardized and recognized by meme audiences. Memetic templates require a format because memes cannot exist without subject matter and information pulled from an issue, event, topic, or even a thought. The format of a meme is the structure by which a meme is created and thus has inherent rhetorical qualities. Figure 5.4 represented an image macro meme. A highly shareable, often humorous, form of political expression, the image macro meme is the quintessential meme format (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Tay, 2012). The text on the top was the setup, the image provided the context of the message, and the bottom text delivered the punchline. For meme audiences, image macro memes are recognizable instantly and a message utilizing this memetic template primes consumers for a specific style of information delivery.



Figure 5.4: Trump would have stopped Putin

Presentation style is a key contribution of rhetorical devices in memes. Meme-makers determine font selections, color selections, image selections, editing decisions, and stylistic decisions that emphasize aspects or messages of a meme. The illustration in Figure 5.5 is an example of presentation as a memetic template. Created to appear like a Soviet era painting, with a yellowish hue and characters with early 20th century clothing and uniform, the meme used color and style to present an aesthetic quality to the audience synonymous with communist regimes. There is no text, but Putin is holding an imagined version of Joe Biden as an infant with a befuddled face. The presentation of the meme framed Biden in a position of weakness, ineptitude, helplessness, and futility in comparison to Putin and reinforced a conservative view that the President is not capable of handling the United States' potential involvement in the Ukrainian-Russian war.



Figure 5.5: Putin holding baby Biden

Memetic templates get messages across to audiences quickly and condense complex events and issues into snack size bits of information. The memetic template appropriates popular and meme culture as a rhetorical device. The memetic template was a central presentation selection of meme-makers for both liberal and conservative audiences.

5.3 Quotes

A rhetorical device consistently used by meme-makers that emerged in the analysis of the selection data was the inclusion of a quote. Utilized in a multitude of different arrangements and with varying degrees of quote selection and purpose, quotes simply used words, factual or not, of a speech, video clip, or social media post to develop a meme. In some instances, quotes were screenshots of a social media post or a pull quote from a politician. In other memes, quotes were completely fabricated, but still attributed to an individual. A common practice among meme-makers was to take a quote and add context, humor, supportive arguments, dissenting arguments, and other rhetorical elements that used the quote as the foundational information to deliver an intended message. Quotes provided meme-makers with opportunity to amplify pro-attitudinal messages or deride counter attitudinal messages and often delivered messages in conversational, non-formal language.

In Figure 5.6, a meme-maker used a screenshot of a post from actor and conservative Kevin Sorbo. The post had no additional context or messaging and Sorbo's comments were simply being amplified to a pro-attitudinal meme audience. However, in Figure 5.7 a conservative meme-maker used a quote from journalist Glenn Greenwald that supported a narrative held by right wing ideology that the media leaned to the left, was liberal, and that fact-checking was a fraudulent practice. The quote was pulled into the context of the argument the meme-maker attempted to support and additional rhetoric was added near the quote. "FACT

CHECKS ARE FRAUD” was printed in all capital letters to paraphrase and support the quote and the identifier “actual journalist” was used to describe Greenwald which implied that there are fake journalists.

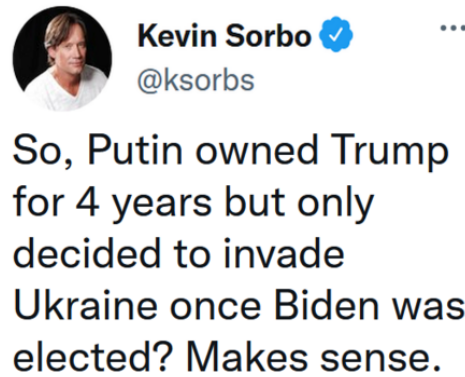


Figure 5.6: Kevin Sorbo quote

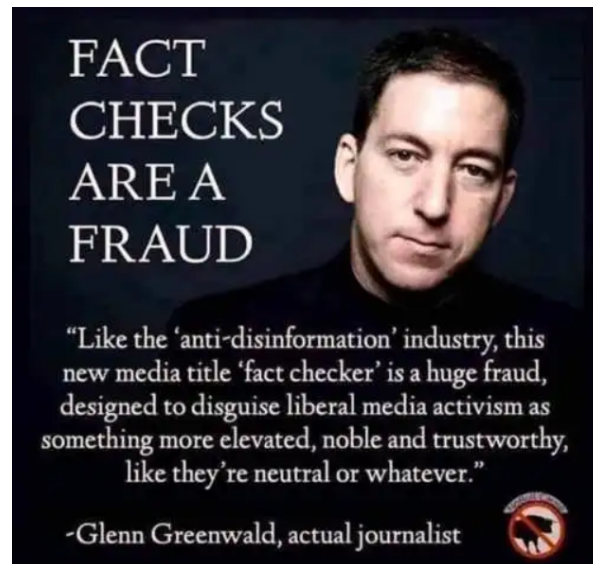


Figure 5.7: An actual journalist

Figure 5.8 exemplified a quote as a rhetorical device that was a fabrication and concocted by a meme-maker. Putin stated that he has very little concern for economic sanctions or NATO alliances, but support from Trump made him doubt his actions. Of course, Putin never said these words, but the alignment of his image, the subject matter of the text, and the collective understanding amongst audiences that misrepresentation and falsification of fact is intrinsic to

meme culture made this quote a vessel for liberal meme creators to express a disparaging stance on Trump's strategic and cognitive abilities.

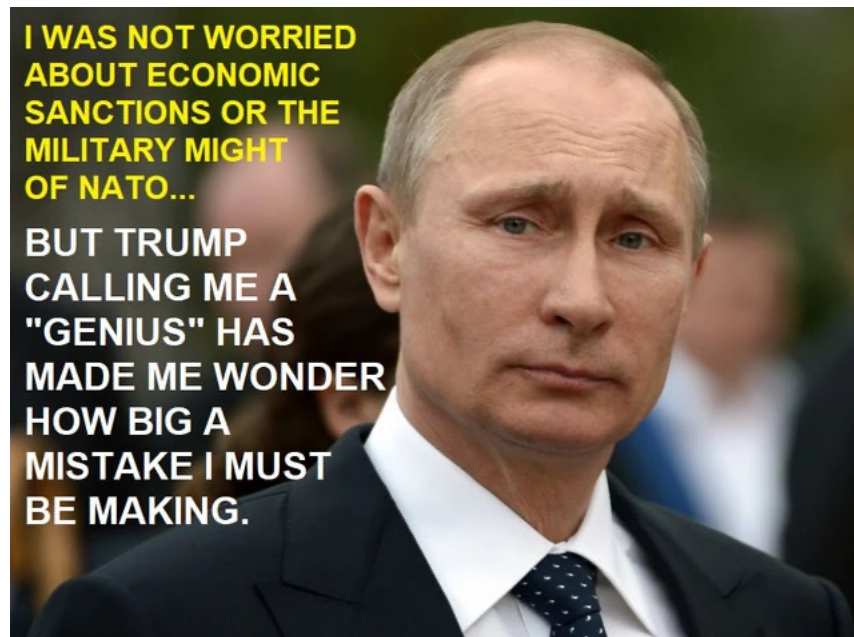


Figure 5.8: Putin second guessing

Quotes emphasized the credibility of a message amongst like-minded audiences. A meme can unify individuals with ideological similarities and meme-makers used quotes, real or imagined, from high profile political leaders and personalities to deliver influential messages. A quote requires even less creation time which makes virality and consumption, two purposes of a meme (Bebic & Volaric, 2018), highly probable.

5.4 Symbolism in Memes

Constructed in any manner, memes are symbolic and use representational symbols, images, and messages to deliver information to audiences. Symbolism was pervasive in the analysis of the data. Memes are inherently symbolic as small bits of easily digestible information that often represent larger socio-political issues, discourse, and topics. In the two subreddit communities, symbols were also used to emphasize arguments and belief systems by both

supporting pro-attitudinal stances or attacking counter attitudinal stances. Symbology in political memes from the week of analysis included representation of well-known symbolic objects such as flags, political symbols, and logos as well as imagery and text that were emblematic of ideological beliefs, policy issues, and partisan stereotypes.

Figure 5.9 was a flag waving in the air with “Mean Tweets” and the campaign year of 2024. The words referred to Trump and referenced a common theme, that Trump was the solution and Biden was the problem, among memes posted on r/ConservativeMemes after the beginning of the war. A flag has a symbolic meaning as a representation of people, nation-state, or ideology and can be a unifying emblem that carries a message without additional context. Symbolism in memes can also be rooted in popular culture. Figure 5.10 is an example of a meme-maker that has refashioned the Bat Signal, a light in the sky of a silhouetted bat to call the superhero Batman into action when the city of Gotham was in need, to be a silhouetted head of Donald Trump. The message, drenched in symbolism, was that Trump was a hero and the world was in an hour of need.



Figure 5.9: Mean tweets flag

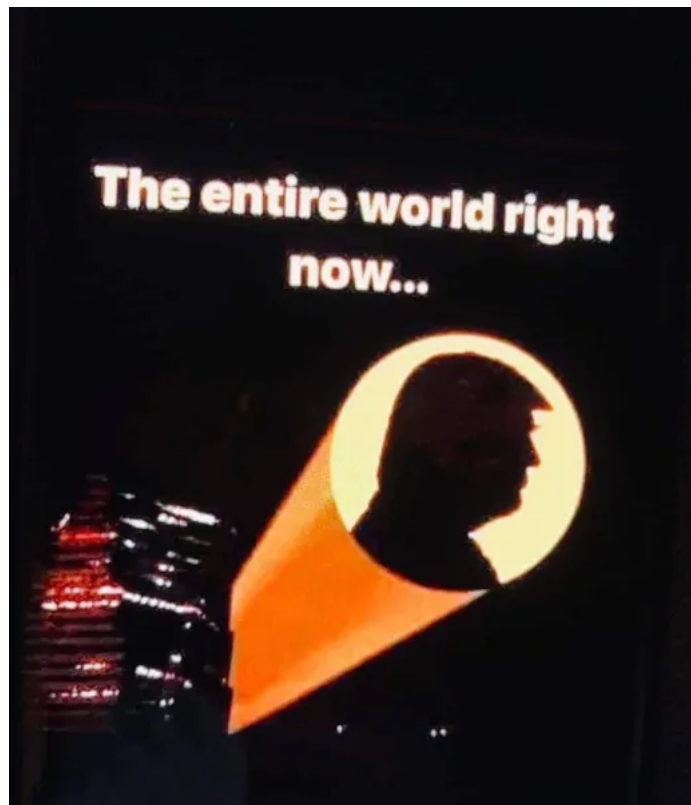


Figure 5.10: Trump Bat Signal

Symbolic techniques relied on the common knowledge of the audience to understand the reference and apply the meaning themselves. Figure 5.11 displayed a meme with no text or additional context other than a symbol. An ushanka, a Russian hat that has been used as a stereotypical representation of Russian fashion in the United States, was brandished with a patch on the front with the letters “MAGA,” which stands for Trump’s slogan of “Make America Great Again.” A meme that only acted as a symbolic frame of an image, Figure 5.11 relied on the audience to interpret the intended message that Republicans that support Trump were connected with Russians. The meme did leave the audience open to interpretation of what that connection represented and how those two symbols related to one another.



Figure 5.11: MAGA ushanka

5.5 Inattentional Blindness

A rhetorical device uncovered in the analysis of both conservative and liberal meme-makers was the implementation of inattentional blindness. Inattentional blindness refers to a meme construction that leads an individual to overlook or fail to notice something that is fully visible and relevant in the field of vision because their attention is focused elsewhere. Meme-makers crafted information, usually text, of a meme to initially be interpreted one way before unveiling a truly intended message. In meme culture, inattentional blindness can be implemented by meme-makers to play off the quick interpretation of a meme and add a secondary layer of understanding. For instance, in Figure 5.12, an image of a burning building was placed at the bottom of the meme. At the top, the text began by informing the reader that the scene below is the city of Kyiv. However, the next sentence revealed that the image was actually from Minnesota and the scene was a result of domestic rioting. The meme-maker relied on the audience to follow a memetic layout consumption process of viewing the meme from top-to-bottom. Due to inattentional blindness, the fiery image was unlikely to garner the direct attention of a meme audience, which probably neglected to notice the English writing and words visible in

the image. The viewer only noticed the flames and carnage and began reading the text, so the audience's inattention blindness worked even in a static image meme.

Shocking picture of Kiev after
being Bombed by Russia.

Just kidding this is a peaceful
protest in America.



Figure 5.12: Kyiv burning, just kidding this is America

Inattention blindness was used in both meme posting communities for conservatives and liberals. Conservative memes used this as a rhetorical device to promote themes of violence in the United States whereas liberal memes used inattention blindness to draw attention to Republican rhetoric that revealed a negative or adverse reaction to Trump or Carlson endorsements.

5.6 Contradictions

Another rhetorical device evident in both conservative and liberal meme communities through analysis were the use of contradictions. Meme-makers used contradictions, specifically statements from the past, to take an individual's own words and use them against that person. In conservative memes, the most prevalent contradiction deployed by meme-makers was Biden's social media post prior to winning the election in which he boasted that Putin did not want him in office because he was the only candidate that would "go toe-to-toe" with him. Figure 5.13 was an example of Biden's boast used against him. Conservative meme creators latched onto this post and repurposed it as a meme with frequency in the week following the invasion of Ukraine by a Putin-led Russian military.



Figure 5.13: Tell me again how tough you are

Liberal meme creators targeted former FOX News pundit Tucker Carlson for contradictions. After the Russians opened a violent conflict in Ukraine, Carlson was deemed a sympathetic media personality to Russia's actions. Quotes, statements, and screenshots from Carlson's show were converted to memes and reframed his own words as adversarial to the

interest of the United States and supportive of Putin's strategy. Figure 5.14 exemplified a liberal meme creator that pulled an image directly from Carlson's live broadcast and used crudely edited Russian symbols alongside the show's original lower third graphic. The image used Carlson's own graphic, along with emphatic visual additions, to accentuate this contradiction.



Figure 5.14: Comrade Carlson

Memetic templates, quotes, symbolism, inattentional blindness, and contradictions were prevalent rhetorical devices deployed by meme-makers in both conservative and liberal meme creation communities. While the intent and material of the messages were oppositional, rhetorical elements from these five practices were indicative of the process, environment, consumption habits, and expectation of meme audiences.

6 DISCUSSION

From the inductive analysis of memes of the subreddit communities of r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes in the seven days following the start of the Ukrainian-Russian war, 10 themes emerged from the data selection. Five unique themes were coded, identified, and described in conservative memes – ineptitude, weakness, fear-mongering, corruption, and delusion. Three unique themes were coded, identified, and described in liberal memes – puppets and sympathizers, heroic leadership, and submissive through sex. Two themes were coded and identified in both conservative memes and liberal memes – hypocrisy and spin.

Additionally, during thematic analysis, the researcher documented rhetorical devices used by meme-makers from both conservative and liberal reddit communities. Five rhetorical devices utilized by meme-makers to deliver thematic messages and potentially create frames were memetic templates, quotes, symbolism, inattentional blindness, and contradictions. These rhetorical elements were deployed by meme-makers to emphasize pro-attitudinal messages, advance political and ideological narratives, and increase the virality of a meme.

6.1 The Thematic Right vs. Left

Conservative and liberal meme creators applied different thematic approaches and strategies to build persuasive, influential, and accepted messages for their intended audiences. Meme-makers leaned heavily on political actors and personalities, controversies and conspiracies, salient social issues, ideological hallmarks, and stereotypical representations in crafting of memes following the conflict in Ukraine. A comparison of themes between liberal and conservative memes revealed varying strategies on broad topics like leadership, political relationships, and the ideological positions of political voter bases.

6.1.1 Representation of Leaders

A high frequency of memes collected from r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes featured a political figure as a primary subject or target of the content. Predictably, liberal memes set sights on Trump. In kind, conservative memes zeroed in on Biden. The approach to leadership in memes from the data selection often focused on the denigration of the opposition. In memes with themes of ineptitude and weakness, conservatives attacked Biden's mental capacity. The President was often portrayed as a weakling, infant, or child – a leader with no ability to intimidate or threaten a superpower like Russia.

Disparagement and criticism were also built into the portrayal of Republican leaders in liberal memes. The puppets and sympathizers theme painted Trump and other conservative personalities as unfit to lead through morally corrupt and anti-American actions and statements. However, liberal meme-makers also generated messages with themes of heroic leadership. Biden and Zelenskyy were depicted as brave and courageous leaders, often in juxtaposition with conservatives. Memes themed as heroic leadership often portrayed liberal politicians as cool, noble, and pillars of democracy. A few memes from the r/ConservativeMemes data selection did attempt to present Trump as heroic, but the disparagement of Biden with messages of ineptitude and weakness was an overwhelming thematic tool in the arsenal of right-wing meme-makers.

6.1.2 Purposeful Proximity to Foreign States

A noticeable similarity in the construction of memes from both conservative and liberal meme-makers was a deliberate strategy to create messages that place political targets in close physical and metaphorical proximity to Russian or Ukrainian interests. The puppets and sympathizers theme and the submissive through sex theme are representative of this practice in liberal memes. Images with Trump depicted in suggested or overt sexual positions and situations

with Putin were composed by liberal meme-makers. The representation of Trump and Putin involved in a physical relationship symbolize a perspective from the American left that Trump has been compromised by Russian interests.

Interestingly, the opposite side of the political spectrum created similar messages to imply a relationship between Biden and Ukraine. The conservative theme of corruption was detected in memes that tried to tie Biden or his family to foreign interests in Ukraine. Liberal memes manifested a power dynamic between Trump and Putin, but conservative memes focused on a theme of corruption and criminality of Democrats. Each of these themes aided meme-makers to build upon and frame narratives of oppositional politicians acting on behalf of or in league with foreign entities.

6.1.3 Hypocrisy and Spin

The two themes that emerged in the analysis of both conservative and liberal memes, hypocrisy and spin were deployed differently by meme-makers depending on the audience. Conservative meme-makers focused on the hypocrisy of statements made or policies enacted by Democratic leaders. Conservatives were especially concentrated on domestic issues and personal freedoms as central topics to illustrate hypocrisy. COVID-19 protocols and gun control were among the top domestic issues that fueled right-wing meme creators' response to Biden, the Democratic Party, and the burgeoning situation in Ukraine.

The liberal approach to hypocrisy was quite different. Instead of using policy or quotes, left-wing creators built memes to point out the hypocritical nature of Republican strategy and ideology. Liberal meme-makers dispersed memes that addressed the contrarian nature of conservative response and rhetoric regardless of a Democratic stance on an issue. This was also a central tenant of liberal meme-makers, to cue the audience into spin – the second shared theme.

From the Democrats' perspective, Republicans were simply waiting to pounce on the Biden administration's response and liberals created memes to illustrate how the right uses spin.

On the other side, conservative memes presented an alternative usage of spin as a theme. Meme-makers on the right perpetuated the narrative that the news media is biased towards liberals. A continuation of Trump's popularization and Republican adoption of the term "fake news," conservative memes set sights on the mainstream news media with thematic messaging of spin in an attempt to undermine the credibility and trustworthiness of non-conservative news outlets. The themes of hypocrisy and spin were deployed in varying styles and with completely different purposes by meme-makers from both liberal and conservative communities.

6.2 A Rhetorical Question

Without rhetorical devices, memes could not exist. The text, imagery, aesthetic, layout, design, shape, color, and any other visual element that comprises a meme can be a rhetorical element wielded and empowered by the meme-makers. The final research question of this study sought to uncover rhetorical devices used in the creation of political memes in the wake of the first moments of the Ukrainian-Russian war. Five rhetorical devices emerged as part of the political meme-maker's arsenal. Memetic templates, quotes, symbolism, inattentional blindness, and contradictions were rhetorical elements used to create politically motivated messages in memes.

In a digital environment where meme-makers had access to select innumerable content to build a meme, the palette of rhetorical devices was limited only to the imagination of the maker. Modal memes and a meme literate audience may help to pare down the styles, aesthetics, and layouts of many memes, but the canvas for meme-makers started blank with every possible tool available in the kit. As a consequence of having every option, a comparison of rhetorical devices

among two distinct meme distribution communities posed a significant challenge. Every meme in the selection was different and therefore had an individualized set of rhetorical elements.

Presentation, format, attentional misdirection, and strategic use of information were all rhetorical weapons at the disposal of meme-makers in response to the Ukrainian-Russian war. Memetic templates and modal memes were prominent in the data selection. Meme-makers used a foreign conflict to generate pro-attitudinal messages in memes and increased the probability of virality with compositions that are familiar to meme audiences. Jenkins' (2014) conception of a mode, a meme template that has achieved circulation and recognition by meme audiences, was evidenced by liberal and conservative meme-makers creation of messages with the same memetic packaging – like the Drake hypocrisy meme in Figures 5.1 and 5.2. Image macro memes, arguably the most identifiable memetic format (Denisova, 2019), were pervasive memetic templates in this selection of political memes and several other modal memes contributed to the spread of influential messages to the two Reddit communities.

Meme-makers that used inattentional blindness tactics took advantage of the selective attention of meme audiences. Memes are consumed in seconds. As a rhetorical device, inattentional blindness allowed meme creators to construct messages with misdirection. Meme-makers leveraged the process and speed by which audiences deciphered memes and added a second layer of comprehension to emphasize a persuasive argument. In memes built with inattentional blindness techniques, the meme-maker revealed information that supported their ideological stance or argument. Individuals that create memes are aware of how quickly audiences interpret the meaning of the meme because meme-makers are part of meme audiences in a participatory environment. The insight of being both creator and consumer provided meme-makers with opportunities to bake inattentional blindness into political meme messages.

A key commonality of memes posted by both conservative and liberal meme creators was the inability for audiences to authenticate rhetorical information. Conservative meme-makers made several posts with a comparison of gas prices from Donald Trump's term to Joe Biden's term. The image selected for Trump's term had a lower gas price than the image selected for Biden's term. However, there was no way for the audience to substantiate that either image was legitimately representing the period the meme-maker asserted in the meme.

Similarly, a liberal creator used an image of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in full military gear and implied that he was fighting alongside his countryman in the first days of the war while Republican Ted Cruz was leaving Texas, and his constituents, in the middle of a winter weather storm. The image of Zelenskyy was not verified from the front lines and could not be proven an accurate depiction based on the presentation and consumption of the meme alone. Conservative and liberal meme-makers used rhetorical devices with the knowledge that the elements that composed the meme did not need to be factual, as noted by Milner (2016).

An additional commonality in rhetorical framing elements in the meme selection was the usage of culturally recognized figures. Musicians, movie stars, children's cartoons, and even memetic templates lent familiarity to the message delivery system of political memes. In this analysis, conservative memes used imagery and language markers from the entertainment industry and memetic template staples like *Forrest Gump*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Tom and Jerry*, and *Euphoria*. Liberal memes had imagery of *Shrek*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Major Payne*, *Family Guy*, and *Tiger King*. Conservatives and liberals utilized pop culture references as memetic templates and symbols to connect with their respective meme audiences.

In liberal and conservative memes, contradictions were rhetorical and literary devices used to discredit the opposition. The online archive has provided a vast and expansive record of human communication in the digital age and virtual communities can scour the past and dig for contradictions. The infamous and unattributed phrase “the internet never forgets” is applicable to political meme creators that contributed to r/ConservativeMemes and r/PoliticalMemes. A powerful rhetorical tool that can deliver a highly persuasive argument, meme-makers often used contradictions paired with another rhetorical device: quotes. Meme creators did not lack for material or rhetorical components when crafting memes to advance potentially framed messages of virtual and visual rhetoric.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study had potential limitations. As a qualitative and inductive research endeavor, the identification of themes and rhetorical devices was up to the interpretation and analysis of the individual researcher. Furthermore, while the themes provided an indicator of salience for the meme-maker, the themes and rhetorical devices may have been received and interpreted differently by an individual meme consumer or a mass meme audience. A noted limitation by the researcher was the difference in the number of memes analyzed in the study. Memes from the conservative subreddit community nearly tripled the amount from the liberal subreddit community and the conservative community subscriber base was significantly larger, thus leading to a more diverse and robust data set for conservatives. The researcher acknowledges the numerical difference, but also the digital and global environment must be considered. Republicans were not in office at the time of data selection and the major decisions of the United States in the days after a major geopolitical event was a prime opportunity to vocalize dissent.

Simply stated, conservatives and Republicans may have had a higher volume and more forceful objection to liberal policies with a Democratic president in office.

Further research is needed to determine the meme creation and posting patterns of political audiences to shed light on the environmental and social factors that influence political meme frequency, themes, and topics. Additionally, future avenues of research on political memes could include the media frames meme-makers are using to present information in a visual and digital medium.

A significant challenge in the examination of political memes is the scope and breadth of topics, characters, issues, and ideologies. Meme audiences include meme-makers and meme creators are also influenced by the intake and viewing of memes. Since meme-makers can be any person with access to the world wide web, arguably millions of individual perspectives on politics, popular culture, history, mass media, religion, human rights, or even memes themselves can leak into the meme creation process. The sheer volume of topics covered in the data selection required extensive knowledge and research of politicians, policies, political belief structures, cartoons, movies, memetic templates, and several other categories to properly ascertain the themes and rhetorical devices evident in political memes. The diversity and variety of memes makes the research of memes a process of familiarization and can be obfuscated by widening generational knowledge gaps between the researcher and the meme audience.

6.4 Conclusion

The relationship between memes and politics has been irrevocably fused. The participatory digital environment empowers individuals to create persuasive messages and meme-makers across the political spectrum have a platform to contribute influential material. At the disposal of meme creators is an unending flow of news, topics, and issues. The political

meme-maker can insert rhetorical elements, like symbols, imagery, and textual arguments, into established memetic templates to transfer persuasive messages directly to an intended audience. Memes are underrated for their capability to diffuse information to mass audiences and politically charged messages warrant the examination of the mechanisms, motives, and effects of these digital bites of humor, satire, irony, symbolism, and savagery.

The inductive analysis of 126 total memes yielded the identification of distinct themes from conservative and liberal meme communities. Ineptitude, weakness, fear-mongering, corruption, and delusion were the unique themes that arose in conservative memes. In liberal memes, puppets and sympathizers, heroic leadership, and submissive through sex were the unique identified themes. The themes of hypocrisy and spin were detected in both conservative and liberal data selections. Finding and understanding the thematic properties of political memes unveiled political actors, issues, and policy that conservatives and liberals deemed salient in the initial days of the Ukrainian-Russian war.

The thematic analysis also revealed the rhetorical devices that political meme-makers use to compose influential messages. Memetic templates, quotes, symbolism, inattentional blindness, and contradictions were prevalent and ubiquitous rhetorical devices used by conservative and liberal meme-maker alike.

The identification and understanding of themes and rhetorical devices inherent to political memes, and potentially memes in general, is significant for a multitude of reasons. As a relatively new and digitally dependent form of communication, political memes are pervasive and accessible. The barrier of entry is extremely low. The ease and access of creating and disseminating memes exacerbates the need to examine the techniques and decision-making process of meme-makers generating powerful messages. Understanding the thematic

compositions and rhetorical techniques that meme-makers are using could potentially open new avenues of scholarly research on the framing practices of audience-driven, user-led communication that continues to smash the archaic one-way mass media model of the 20th century. A full conceptualization of meme culture and the selective practices of meme creation might allow for political actors to better anticipate the needs, desires, and voice of the populace.

The examination of conservative and liberal political memes at the start of the Ukrainian-Russian war led to valuable insights in the themes and rhetoric of meme-makers in both digital communities. Despite being crude, unsubstantiated, unpolished, heavily biased, and snackable digital messages, political memes were rich with perspectives, issues, opinions, humor, creativity, and viral capability. A conflict between nations acted as a stimulus for meme creators to levy an unrelenting flow of ideological attacks on the political opposition. Meme-makers were making selective decisions with every pixel in a political meme. The color of the text, the expression on a politician's face, the syntax of the words, the aesthetic style, the memetic template, and other rhetorical devices were on the palette of the meme-makers and the choices they made constituted persuasive messages designed for the audiences' interpretation. As long as the world remains plugged into a cybernetic age, memes will continue to disseminate messages of persuasion, influence, and political relevance.

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