POLITICAL MEME HUMOR AND ITS EFFECT ON VIEWS OF POLITICIANS AND POLICIES

Introduction

What do Christianity, Gangnum Style, and Success Kid meme all have in common? They are all ideas that have been passed from one individual to another. Many would not expect this to actually have a scientific meaning behind it. This is called memetics. Many of us have heard of memes as funny popular internet videos, memes (the frozen picture with captions), or gifs. The meme humor phenomenon has an effect on everyday life and is used to stereotypes of groups of individuals through these captioned pictures. This is important and deserving of research because memes may have the power to persuade individual’s opinions through the use of humor. One of the ways memes are used is to poke fun at politics. This study is to find if political meme humor has the power to persuade voters on their opinions of politicians and their policies.

Where Memes Came From and Where They were Seen

Memes today are known mostly for their existence on the internet. There is a wide spectrum of what a meme is. I have classified memes into two categories for the purpose of this study. A Meme, a snapshot of a picture that has a caption on it, which is the proper name that has become the vernacular for this type of meme. The Meme that is being captioned is usually centered on a specific trend or central idea. For example the meme success kid which depicts a
baby clutching his fist in success has the central idea of success, but what is success is
determined by the maker of the meme and the caption.

Then there are other memes which for the case of this is anything else relating to popular
internet videos, posts, jokes, or trends that are happening. Successful memes will go on to cross
cultures and live on while unsuccessful memes will become extinct.

This year during the presidential election there was an exponential increase in the
number of memes and Memes that flooded the internet. From what I saw from most of these was
that the memes take a liberal view with a small number of republican favorable memes used to
counter. There was also a shift in the memes that were already in existence to move their ideas
toward a political view point but still have the same central idea (Timpana, 2012).

Most memes that surfaced during the campaign period leading up to the election were
focused on incidences that happened during speeches or during debates. For example Romney’s phrase “Binders full of Women” launched an internet frenzy along with his statements on PBS and Big Bird (Menzie, 2012).

**Theoretical Grounding**

**Elaboration likelihood model**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion will be used to look at how Memes have the ability to affect an individual’s political perspectives or opinions using humor as a persuasion tool. The ELM model is focused on two routes of persuasion. The first route known as the central route is focused on high elaboration of what is being presented. This route goes through the cognitive thought process of the individual and will undergo more scrutiny be broken down to understand. An argument using the central route must be will constructed, come from a reliable source, and be convincing, even if the audience has an opposing position they can still be swayed using the central route. The second route is peripheral route which goes around the central by posing the argument and using the environment, the likeability of the persuader, and the quality of how the argument is presented (Griffin, 2009). Using the ELM method I will be looking at how political memes use the peripheral route when presenting their opinions on political candidates and issues to sway people towards their opinions.

**Agenda setting and framing**

Agenda Setting and Framing are the second type of theory I will apply to this research.
Agenda Setting are usually applied to a larger type of media like television where the owners of the networks are telling the views what is important is how to take care of or make sure it is used. Framing is how something is set up for the audience and why it is a problem. Using the framing sub theory of The Picture in Our Heads, which is the way an image is presented to us is how we set the image in our mind and apply our opinion to that image. Applying this theory related to issues that are prominent in the media are prominent in the public’s eye. In relation to the internet as a mass media outlet the use of memes have the ability to frame issues in politics to the public based on the pictures given to the public (McCombs, 2006).

**Relatable Sources on Memes and Persuasive Humor**

**Memes**

Memes get their name from the scientific theory of Memetics (Dawkins, 1976). Memes are a small unit of culture that flow from person to person and can be represented as any form of idea that is duplicated. Examples include religion, cultural norms, the idea of what is cool, etc.

**Globalization.**

Shifman and Thelwell (2009) created an experiment to track a joke through different cultures and understand how the joke changes over time. The experiment was conducted through observing several different countries and seeing how the same joke when transferred to that country changed to adapt to the culture and keep the same basic idea of what the joke was
focused on. What they have found is that internet humor has the power to last longer than other jokes passed in different ways due to the internet’s globalization ability. Globalization is the developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide. When a meme is globalized it goes through changes to match the culture that it is currently being used in but the idea behind the meme does not change. The study confirmed Dawkins (1976) work on the theory of memetics.

**Political Humor in Mass Media**

The political humor found in mass media specifically looking at The Daily Show and shows like it will help understand how humor has the power to persuade individuals on their opinions of politics. Polk, Young, G, & Holbert (2009) using humor as a persuasive tool looked at The Daily Show with John Stewart and how persuasion affects viewer’s opinions of politics for the entertainment. The Daily Show uses all different types of humor, parody, satire, irony and sarcasm (Holbert, et. all, 2009).

**Irony.**

Irony is defined as the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning (Websters, 2003).

**Sarcasm.**

Sarcasm is defined as a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain (Websters, 2003).
Satire.

Satire is defined as work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn (Websters, 2003).

Parody.

Parody is defined as work in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule (Websters, 2003).

In the experiment conducted the subjects were broken up into three different groups. They were then exposited to high or low motivated humor clips from The Daily Show about the Iraq War and to irony, sarcasm or no humor and then they were surveyed and asked to write counter arguments about what was watched. The study found it harder for the participants to counter argue the shows opinion. They also found that for the subjects irony was harder to understand than sarcasm.

The humor used by The Daily Show is used to distract the audience from the messages core argument by placing demand on the cognitive function of the brain to comprehend the joke and there by lower the audiences counter ability to argue. Humor also has the power to decrease the desire to counter argue. (Polk, J. Young, D.G. & Holbert. R, 2009) Humor in general has persuasive power, humorous messages are better at grabbing the audience’s attention than non humor it can also increase like ability of the humor source and in return make the humor source more believe able (Morris, 2009).
Hmielowski, J.D., Holbert, R., & Lee, J. (2011) have found that the Daily Show delivers just as much news as the traditional news style show. The experiment was to view if watching The Daily Show increased levels of knowledge about political and how it affected the youth. The experiment was a survey conducted by calling random landline phones. Once on the phone individuals were asked how often they watched The Daily Show as their primary news source. What was wrong with the experiment was that it used land phones to find this out when the majority of the subjects in the experiment are in college and do not use land lines.

This article also describes the Affinity for Humor: Broken into three different dimensions which point out and highlight incongruent information (Young, 2007). These include: Humor contributing to a sense of superiority, (Feinberg, 1978; Meyer, 2000; Raskin, 1985; Ziv, 1984); The use of humor to relieve stress and anxiety, (Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Meyer, 2000; Raskin, 1985; Ziv, 1984); The ability for humor to facilitate interpersonal relationships (Ziv, 1984). Need for Humor: which is broken down by a few statements to describe it (Cline, 1997; Cline et al., 2003): Other people tell me that I say funny things. Sometimes I think up jokes or funny stories. I like to be around people who have a funny sense of humor. I like situations where people can express their sense of humor.

Baumgartner, J. (2008) researched political cartoons, their interpretations, effect on the youth in the digital age. This looked at how the youth are now socialized into politics through the digital age and media habits have changed between the generations. From the history of political cartoons it has been shown that political cartons have been around since 1360 B.C. Though they
have changed over this large period of time the one thing that has not changed is that their interpretation changes from person to person and is not in control of the artist of how the cartoon is perceived. Baumgartner’s experiment involved surveying how a political cartoon was viewed when sent to college students and then asked to take a survey on how it affected the students views of the candidates in the cartoon. What was found is this research was that if a republican was being made fun of individuals favored that candidate, even though they were the butt of the joke.

Hoffman, L.H, & Young, D.G. (2011) in their study comparing Nightly News like The Tonight Show, Late Night with Letterman and shows like that cannot be compared to shows like The Colbert Report or The Daily Show. The Daily Show and Colbert report are more related to actually traditional news outlets. Baugartner & Morris (2009) found that exposure to The Daily Show can increase viewers internal political efficacy and place a critical eye on the government that is not trusting but isn’t bad. It may be positive and healthy to have a critical view of the government that can grow. The experiment to prove the results was by surveying college age students and to ask them to compare the amount of Late Night television like Jay Leno or David Lettermen they watched compared to The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. The study found that this is where the majority of college students get their political information from these more humorous outlets.

**Overview of Important Findings**

The notes taken from the study have given the proper insight to understand that the
use of humor can have a great deal of effect on the political presence and understanding of certain areas of political policies. The humor is focused into three certain areas of parody, sarcasm, and irony. Humor has the power to disarm the audience and make them more open to the suggestions of the joke provider. (Polk, et. all, 2009) Memes when used as jokes are able to have a longer lifespan on the internet due to the communication phenomenon of globalization. (Shifman & Thelwall 2009)

Methodology

This thesis is centered around the meme phenomenon, specifically Memes that are focused on politics. Memes are pictures freeze framed that are given a central idea and a caption pertaining to that idea. The caption of the Meme can change but the central idea of the Meme stays the same. The difference between a meme and a Meme is memes pertain to any idea that is transferred from person to person online. In specifically looking at the freeze frame memes which are specifically named Memes. Political memes have become a new way for people to transfer ideas through the use of the internet. Looking at this will be to find out if Meme humor had an effect on individual’s views of politicians and of political policies.

The experiment will specifically going to look at individuals on my college campus ages 18 to 24 of all different types of the political backgrounds. This will be to examine people from all types of genders, races and socioeconomic levels. I say gender instead of sex because I thing feel that sex will have little to no affect on my research where as gender will have a larger affect on
I will be examining the amount of internet time people spend on the internet and what they are doing with that time. I also want to consider what individuals are looking at when they look at Memes. Which memes they specifically examine or frequent the most, along with that Meme pertaining to any political ideals. I will examine the individuals who not only look at memes but also create their own memes in an effort to get their political ideologies out into the world.

I will be using a qualitative method for conducting my research. I chose to do qualitative because I will conduct my research through the use of surveys. In using the survey I want to look at the way Memes are interpreted between individuals. I am also going to be looking to compare what type of Memes are frequented the most and if those memes tend to lean toward certain political ideologies themselves. I would also like to compare the number of republicans to the number of democrats that use memes and in the way they use them. I will look at the effectiveness of the Meme in getting its point across through the use of humor and the effectiveness of it transferring ideas to the individual. I would also like to look at the number of people who created Memes geared towards the use of political persuasion. I would also like to consider how the meme is examined whether it is strictly on a Meme based website, email, or through social media. Social media can then be broken down into Twitter, Facebook, and Pintrest.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: How did Memes affect the 2012 presidential election?
RQ2: Are Memes geared toward a more liberal perspective or conservative perspective.

RQ3: Are republicans or democrats more likely to use Memes as a way of transferring their ideologies between each other.

RQ4: What Memes are geared toward politics that do not have ideals that are specifically geared towards politics.

Quantitative

a. The type of Memes viewed
   i. These Memes can be measured in the amount of times it is mentioned by individuals in the survey. The type of Meme it is based on the idea that it centers around. I can also measure whether the Meme is specifically for politics of if the central idea of another Meme has been adapted to a specific political ideology.
   ii. The dependent variable in this is which candidate is favored by the majority of Meme interactions.

Procedure

1. Which type of Memes did you see more of? (choose all that apply)
   a. Favor of Republican ideologies
   b. Neutral of Republican ideologies
   c. Negative of Republican ideologies
   d. Favor of Democratic ideologies
   e. Neutral of Democratic ideologies
   f. Negative of Democratic ideologies
i. Using this type of question in my survey I can get an idea of what direction most Memes lean and what is the favorable political opinion.

2. What political ideology do you most associate yourself with?
   a. Extremely conservative
   b. Conservative
   c. Moderate conservative
   d. Independent
   e. Moderate democratic
   f. Democratic
   g. Extremely Democratic

   i. Using this I will be able to gage what political ideologies are most likely to use Memes.

I will use a t-test because a t-test compares two differences within a category. I will be using the t-test to compare the Memes viewed and the two differences will be whether the Memes are Republican themed or if they are Democratic themed. I chose them because I can find out which political ideology is able to use technology to its advantage.

I will be using a survey. A survey is a way of finding out self reported behaviors and beliefs. A survey will present the individual taking the survey with a question that offers them different choices and is usually close ended and can be measured through numerically by
collecting the data. I plan on distributing the survey through the surveymonkey and creating a survey that will take 10 minutes at the maximum. This survey will be distributed to the campus population of Longwood if possible through the all student email. If not I will look to multiple peer groups to take the survey and respond. In order to hopefully have a high return on the surveys I will be offering a monetary cash prize to be randomly given to an individual who completes the survey. The survey will focus on several areas already discussed earlier. I will focus on the type of Memes viewed, individuals ideologies, and how the Meme is perceived by the audience (Johnson & Milne 2012).

I believe that Meme humor can affect an individual’s view of a political candidate or political policy through the use of humor. This is non-directional because I do not specifically which way the views of the individuals will change based on the Memes used (Johnson & Milne 2012)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion the understanding of political memes will be able to help politicians during election time with understanding the power of the memes persuasiveness. They will also be able to use the memes to their advantage in understanding youthful voters. The politicians and their consultants will be able to see whether they are having a positive impact on the voters or if the memes are hurting their chances for election or the passing of policies.
Bibliography


