Meme Viability: Elements of Effective Political Internet Memes

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Abstract

The word meme was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book, The Selfish Gene. According to him, memes are cultural accretion of knowledge and ideas that can be passed on to others. Gil (2016) described memes as a virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea. According to him, meme behaves like flu or a virus that travels from person to person quickly. Today, it travels much faster than simple speech. Memes travel instantly through the internet such as email forwards, chats and web page links. Nowadays, political memes have become increasingly prevalent, and become an effective tool for political commentaries (Pleviriti, 2014). Also, memes are highly shareable through social media and are becoming tomorrow’s campaign slogans and firewood for negative ads (Nasri, 2012). Using qualitative methods of research by conducting a thematic analysis of interview excerpts, this study has found that political memes are considered effective and viable when these elements are present: satire, persuasiveness, and relevance. These elements influence many of its audience and move them to like, comment, post, or share about it.

Keywords: Memetics, internet memes, satire, social media

1.0. INTRODUCTION

People adapt to innovation around them. They make use of the technologies available to them. And now the use of media has also escalated in a whole new level. The 21st century gave birth to the new media, a term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images, and sound. While new media are understood in terms of the old media that precede them, they are nonetheless freed, at least to some extent, from tradition constraints (Manovich, 2013). Simultaneously, people have produced the concept of internet meme in social media. Internet meme takes the form of an image, hyperlink, video, website, hashtag, etc. Because of its interactive nature, the transmission of comments and opinion throughout the world can happen in just a few days. This phenomenon has evolved from social, cultural, and technological perspectives (Börzsei, 2013). Despite the emerging studies of an internet meme, it is still viewed as a subjective concept.

According to Patrick Davison in his essay, The Language of Internet Memes (2009), an internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission. This idea has somehow morphed the original mental impression into a type of humor, something funny because it tries to mock and laugh at a person, an idea, belief, behavior, etc. Even though the idea has evolved dramatically, the proponents of this synthesis believe that behind this mimicry, the core characterization of meme still develops; that it carries an idea from one person to another as a unit of imitation and replication.

One of the emerging issues that have attracted many researchers nowadays is the political meme and how these memes are changing
the play of campaigns among politicians. With this, the researchers find it significant to describe how political memes affect society, especially the people exposed in the media. The Philippines has been dabbed as the world’s meme center. This clearly shows that this phenomenon affects how Filipinos think, react, and express their opinion.

In the lens of politics, voters are now expressing their standpoint using internet memes. Some take their judgment using blogs and parody accounts in commenting on different political issues. Although some may see this tool as a form of a joke, the proponents of this synthesis believe that it has a significant effect on those who take part in it. According to Jacques Manod, because of the internet, ideas now have a spreading power, may it be unique or replicated (Manod, 1970). The study aims to understand the effects of social media in national politics, if such exists, through the lens of social media users’ exposure to memes.

2.0. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper studies the reactions of people to political memes. As shown in Figure 1, three major theories are used in the study, namely: Memetics, Selfish Gene Theory, and Semiotics.

Memetics is the study of memes, which draws an analogy with Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. It holds that memes are like genes that can be reproduced, and allow themselves for evolution. Selfish Gene Theory by Richard Dawkins holds that memes are capable of replicating and producing themselves through imitation. Semiotics, on the other hand, is the study of how people use signs and symbols in meaning-making. It traces its roots to the teachings and writings of de Saussure, Barthes and Bakhtin.

These theories are used to qualitatively interpret the data that will be collected after a thorough interview of the respondents. The data will be classified and analyzed thematically.

2.1.1. Objective of the Study

This study aimed to analyze the elements of effective political memes through a study of the reactions of the respondents to these memes.
to give a better understanding of its nature as a form of a political tool.

3.0. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word meme was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book, The Selfish Gene. According to him, memes are cultural accretion of knowledge and ideas that can be passed onto others. Dawkins pointed out that unit human information similar to genes also replicates within a culture.

Meme replication was discussed by Heylighen in 2013, and he described meme replication as a 4-stage process. First is the assimilation of an individual. It is the ability of a meme to infect a new host by entering his memory. Second is the retention of the meme in the memory. The meme must remain in the memory. The longer it stays in the memory, the more chances that it will have spread further. The third is the expression of an individual through speech, text, picture, or behavior that can be perceived by others. The fourth and last is the transmission of the message from one to another through the use of some mediums (Heylighen, 2013).

Gil (2016) described memes as a virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea. According to him, meme behaves like flu or a virus that travels from person to person quickly. Today, it travels much faster than simple speech. Memes travel instantly through the internet such as email forwards, chats, and web page links.

Nowadays, political memes have become increasingly prevalent and become an effective tool for political commentaries (Pleviriti, 2014). Also, memes are highly shareable through social media and are becoming tomorrow’s campaign slogans and firewood for negative ads (Nasri, 2012).

“Any significant political event today is often quickly marked by the release of a meme into cyberspace. These simple graphical messages seize on an event’s most controversial moment, translating it into a digital file of less than a hundred kilobytes. In a matter of seconds after its creation, a meme is shared and read, and if effective, its message spreads like wildfire through the Internet and is received by a global audience” (Zhuang, 2013).

Furthermore, Zhuang (2013) elaborated that the rise of memes has been aided by the emergence of simple web tools that allow anyone to quickly ‘generate’ one and share it. This new form of online communication on political expression is another medium of society’s democratic conversation, adding richness to the online chatter amongst the masses, and a good laugh too.

In today’s digital world, the idea and definition of a meme are changing. Davison (2012) defines internet memes as a piece of culture, a joke, which gains influence through online transmission. Internet memes are unique because of the speed of transmission and the fidelity of its form. Engaging with online memes can help educators to equip students with important strategies for identifying the memes that infect their minds, and for evaluating the effects, these me-
mes have on their (ethical) decision-making, social actions and their relations with others (Knobel and Lankshear 2005).

The study on meme reveals how it evolves from old to the modern world.

Blackmore (1999) argues that memes are instructions for carrying out behavior, stored in brains (or other objects) and passed on by imitation. She stated that scholars must distinguish between imitation, contagion, and social learning, with the last term encompassing imitation but including other phenomena to understand memes.

Another concept that explains memetics is the 100th monkey effect, the study in Japan which examined monkeys from 1952 to 1958. They studied a monkey who washed the sand off sweet potatoes, and then other monkeys started to do it without obvious contact. Hardy (2003) stated that this study is a perfect example of a meme growing and then become accessible to all. The process for learning or acquiring knowledge transmits to others, not in physical contact.

The rise of digital media leads Patrick Davison to his hypothesis about memes as replicable and malleable. According to him, memes can be separated into three components: manifestation, behavior, and ideal.

“The manifestation of a meme is its observable, external phenomena. It is the set of objects created by the meme, the records of its existence. It indicates any arrangement of physical particles in time and space that are the direct result of the reality of the meme. The behavior of a meme is the action taken by an individual in service of the meme. The behavior of the meme creates the manifestation. For instance, if the behavior is photographing a cat and manipulating that photograph with software, the manifestation this creates is the ordered progression of pixels subsequently uploaded to the Internet. The ideal of a meme is the concept or idea conveyed. The ideal dictates the behavior, which in turn creates the manifestation. If the manifestation is a funny image of a cat and the behavior is using software to make it, then the ideal is something like ‘cats are funny’...” (Davison, 2012).

According to Bauckhage (2011), internet memes evolve through commentary, imitation, or parodies or even through related news in media. He studies and investigates the temporal dynamics and infectious properties of 150 famous internet memes. He hypothesized that the majority of currently famous internet memes spread though homogenous communities and social networks rather than through the internet at large.

Memes are part of human culture and development. In addition to that, Knobel and Lankshear (2003) claimed “memes” as an emerging “new literacy.” They also suggest a newness of chronology, in that ordinary people, were able to create new forms of expression and communication using animation software, music, and video editing applications, image manipulation on a scale never seen before and in ways scarce-
4.0. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the aim of this paper, which is to investigate the elements present in political internet memes that affect the participants, qualitative methods were used. This was done to gain a solid foundation that would support the exploration of the areas considered.

The research used the in-depth interview as a method in gathering data. The interview focused on the factors present in memes that make people like, react, and express opinions about political issues.

To capture enough data, the study was not confined and secluded within a single geographical entity. Rather, data gathering activities were done both online and in-person.

Individuals who maintain and are active in social media and are exposed to internet memes are the primary participants of the study. They are those who post, comment, like, share and make a review and react to memes within their networks in general and within their profiles in particular.

Purposive sampling was the sampling method used to determine who among the participants are exposed to memes in social media as well as who among them particularly use it in return. Particular questions in the interview were used to determine if the respondents have ample knowledge of the subject.

A single instrument in the form of an interview guide facilitated the data gathering activities of this study.

Included were questions that would help extract information from the respondents: (1) the elements and factors of meme that made them feel something about it; (2) factors of information present in meme that retains to their memory; (3) motives that lead them to express, share and post their information about memes.

To establish validity, the interview schedule went through 2-tier revisions after separate instances of pilot tests and interviews conducted with five respondents. The parameters and limits of the information were extracted and themed after the latter.

As soon as the research committee approved the instruments and the research designs, the data gathering commenced.

An interview was conducted by the researchers with respondents who are exposed to memes in social media to determine the population of social media users that are affected and have sufficient knowledge about internet memes. With this purpose, particular questions in the interview were advanced to a specific number of respondents. Before the actual interview, the respondents were given informed consent forms.

Among those who are proven to be exposed to memes and knowledgeable about them, advance questions were asked. Responses were retrieved after the majority of the identified respondents accomplished the online forms. They were analyzed and interpreted.

Data from the in-depth interviews were
treated through thematic analysis. Results were classified to the most common of traits viable memes share according to the answers.

5.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Using the Husserlian method of data analysis and Colaizzis’ thematic process, the researchers set the measure, and in the same manner with Colaizzis who affirm that all researches occur through dialogue and that asking the right questions is tantamount to eliciting an accurate description of the experience from study participants (Colaizzis, 1978). On the other hand, Husserl’s focus was on meanings and identifying the essence or central theme of experience as a way of furthering knowledge.

Through a thorough analysis of the transcripts, the researchers found three (3) major themes that characterized the participants’ responses to political memes. These major themes were labeled using direct quotations from the participants; this was done to express the original idea conveyed by the participants.

Themes, however, are not to be interpreted as independent from each other but as complementary aspects of a unified pattern. The three (3) themes as deduced from the transcripts of the participants are:

**Theme 1: Satirical**

Satire is an element which makes use of humor, ridicule, exaggeration, and irony to criticize something in a light-hearted manner.

All participants expressed their views and opinions about political memes. Considering the different contents present in political memes, they describe their opinions as humorous, entertaining, sarcastic, ridiculous, informative as well as having a degree of factual basis present in the memes.

“Sometimes kay malingaw ko, how they make fun of the candidates. Whenever maka relate ko kay, I react to it by liking or commenting ‘haha’ gani. Unya kung malingaw ko kay ako I share” (P7)

“Ahhh maliteral ko nga ‘LOL,’ I laughed at them; they are hilarious, kanang they are made just for fun to entertain the social media users. Yes, I comment, post, share and like these political memes” (P8)

“Sometimes there are memes with hidden meanings that can relate to these politicians” (R15)

“Funny. Ridiculous” (P5)

“I really don’t care. But I like some of the memes if it’s funny” (R11)

“Sometimes, there are memes with hidden meanings that can relate to these politicians” (R15)

“If funny siya. And if naa siya gi target nga issue behind it bitaw. Para nako kay naa man jud element of truth ang memes behind anay na- himoan jud siya. It’s either na exaggerate. Pero, I always believe nga katuohan na siya. Pero nice baya.” (R16)
“Kung kuan sha, kung naa humor on it and if factual bah. Kung tinuod man gud unya naa humor kay ako jud I like.” (R18)

“Actually when I see political memes I share, comment or like these memes because it’s really funny what it portrays” (R16)

“I seldom comment on it. Pero most of the time kay ako I like. Labi na kung funny” (R18)

“It’s good to like something serious made fun of. It’s not something we take seriously because it’s just a joke by the netizens” (R12)

“No, it actually depends, like some of the memes are true that is when it somehow change my views” (P7)

“…… One factor is naa man gud uban memes kay I relate nila unsay nahitabo jud so kataw-anan sha pero naa gihapon siya factual nga reason unya dako pud impact if timely siya” (R16)

Theme2: Persuasiveness

Persuasiveness is a measure of how convincing something or someone is. Most of the participants are persuaded by the memes. Either they are aware of it or they are unconsciously sharing it to other people.

This is evident when the participants are moved to research some information that is being portrayed in the political meme and how they tend to share it to others to influence them and express what they believe is factual. This is also manifested through their liking, commenting, and their change of perspectives.

“Sometimes kay murag ang perception nako sa ubang tawo kay mausab gani kay labi na anong uban nga magbuhat buhat ra sila nga ang uban ba kay murag sayop ang ilang pagbuhat pero part naman na sa ilang expression. Nya murag tungod ana, naa man gud nga uban like mugomit ko Internet nga tapad noko akong mama or kuya, kung makakita silag in ana, murag maapektuhan pud sila mainfluence pud sila ana” (R6)

“……Yes. Heavy social media user man ko. I like, and I share it. Labi na kung daghan mu like and labi na kung di ko ganahan sa candidate nga gibutang sa meme. ako I share para daghan maka hibaw nga wala siya angay” (R20)

“…… Dili lang ko kutob anang mga memes. Maminaw sad ko side nila sa TV, political debate and research sad”(R1)

“…..Sometimes. For example, you see a meme about a politician, and you research the facts” (R13)

“…Pero sometimes if naa ko Makita nga memes kay ma encourage ko mag research about it”(R18)

“Of course, naa jud na siyay effect especially if wala kapa kahibaw kinsa imo I vote. Maka sabot ko through ana nga information. Pero, of course, supported pud sa lain info” (R16)

“I seldom comment on it. Pero most of the time kay ako I like. Labi na kung funny” (R18)

“Dako gyud siya’g influence sa behavior nato. As people, nga makakita ta ug mga reactions, not just the memes but reactions online and I think, this would change our perspective because this memes might put you to the situa-
tion nga ‘ah murag dapat gyud ni nako butaran’ or shall we say nga ‘di ni nato dapat ivote kay in-ani or in-ana’. So maffect gyud ta kung unsa ang atong reactions with this kind of memes” (R2)

“Oh actually maka change jud sha sa perspective especially sa akoo, in terms of sa candidate bugalbugalan sha tungod sa iya binuhatan. Maka ingon jud ko nga mu balhin nala ko sa lain candidate oy. Mu matter jud na siya especially now nga wala pako ka decide kinsa ako I vote jud” (R11)

“Yes, somehow. Personally, it won’t change my stand, mon. Kay naa na man ko napili nga candidate pero ma change gyud ako perspective towards the candidate and the issue. Unya mopugos pud ko ug research unsay nahitabo nganu naa meme” (R20)

“If I see political memes and I hate the person nga naa ngadto I always share it. Also to promote para maaware uban tawo nga bati sha” (R16)

“Yes, but not really. But it can affect how I perceived these politicians. For example, when I have chosen a presidentiable, I won’t change my mind” (R14)

**Theme 3: Relevance**

The relevance of something is a measure of its importance. Some of the participants tend to like, comment, or share political memes if these memes are closely related to their personal or national interest. Others also foresee public concern and feel like these memes have impact and significance to the public.

“Kanang mga memes factor man pud na siya nga makaupdate nako kung unsa ang nahitabo. Dili bya pud ko sigeg tan-aw ug TV and news, nay mga bag-ong issues ipaagi ug meme. Mainform ko nga mao diay ang mga panghitabo” (R6)

“.... For example, with Binay about his skin color, I laugh, but you see memes with him being corrupt, I take it seriously. I become informed” (R15)

“If I find it nga murag dako lagi siya ug impact sa public, murag tan aw nako nga murag sakto man pud ni siya so ako ishare” (R6)

“Often, I do like, but I don’t share. Usually, I share it. Especially if I find it relevant to society” (R14)

“Like atong ‘Ako na naman ang may kasalanan’, katong kang Pnoy nga meme. Kay mag stay jud siya sa ako mind.” (R2)

“....you know very well how Miriam Defensor works in the senate it is very strategic how she uses these memes to counter-attack her foes” (R8)

“....Kuan pud the post is very timely and relevant, mushare pud ko ug memes kung si Miriam Defensor na ang naa sa post” (R8)

“The information it contains, and its relevance to the society” (R13)

“If I find it nga murag dako lagi siya ug impact sa public, murag tan aw nako nga murag sakto man pud ni siya so ako ishare” (R6)

“Yes mag stay if grabe gyud ang iyang impact ug kanang makaingon ko nga ‘ishare gyud ni nako
Using the theory of Dawkins, memes are capable of replication and producing themselves through imitation. In relation with our study, the researchers can come into conclusion through a descriptive analysis of the transcripts that memes are being replicated when audiences share them to others. This information, just like a gene, is now transmitted from one audience to another. This is where our second theory, the Memetics Theory becomes important. It states that memes as genes can reproduce and allow themselves for evolution. Thus, they can spread like germs. As they share political memes, the information present on memes are also shared; hence, informing a lot of people who can go about posting or creating their memes. That is an indication that memes have now evolved in terms of the additional contents that are added on to it. Contents like the use of signs and symbol to emphasize a certain message to the viewers. This is where Semiotics comes in, signs and symbols present on political memes were explored.

6.0. CONCLUSION

Political memes are considered effective and viable when satire is present on it. Satirical characteristics like humor, entertainment, sarcasm, informative, and factual influence many of the audience and move them to like, comment, post or share them. Satire as an element influences the respondents’ reactions and behavior towards political meme. Often, they are persuaded and influenced by the meme if it is closely related to their personal and national interest, or if it has great impact and significance to the public causing them to change perspective. Hence, they share it to others to raise awareness. That is one of the reasons why political memes become viral in a short period. Either memes have a positive or negative effect on its audience; people always feel something about it.

Other elements include persuasion and relevance. Memes, which are satirical in character, are engaging at different Other elements include
persuasion and relevance. Memes, which are satirical, are engaging at different levels resulting in netizens’ liking, commenting and sharing activities. (Theme 1, 2) They become, at some point viral, albeit either positive or negative (unethical or defamatory) presentation, when they touch issues of local or national concerns. (Theme 3).

If one of these elements is present, it could still be viable. If any two elements converge, it could be more viable. If all of the elements (satirical, persuasion, and relevance) are present, it could be an effective meme, hence, a good political campaign tool.

7.0. REFERENCES


