Analysis of Facebook Meme Groups Used During the 2016 US Presidential Election

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Abstract
Using content analysis, this study examines how citizens may use memes to share grassroots political ideas in a social media group setting during elections. Specifically, it offers a glimpse at the types of meme-related Facebook pages that emerged during the 2016 presidential election with an emphasis on representations of the two front-runner candidates—Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Generally, Facebook-meme pages and profile photos of both candidates were negative in tone with Trump more likely to be framed in terms of his hairstyle and facial expressions and Clinton in terms of the email scandal and her relationships with people. Political party and gender differences between these two candidates contributed to variations in representations. Study findings are important as they offer a look at grassroots use of memes during a major election and provide a general overview of Facebook user depictions of the two politicians.

Keywords
social media, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Facebook, grassroots political campaign

Introduction
Throughout the protracted 2016 US presidential race, candidates and citizens shared content on social media platforms, such as Facebook, to influence voter decisions. The interactive environment created by Web 2.0 allows citizens to have a direct and interactive relationship with others (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016). Facebook Pages, which allow social media users to publicly showcase and promote their personal political views, were used throughout the election campaign period to engage users in political conversations about candidates, social issues, and other pertinent topics of discussion. In contrast to personal Facebook profiles, Facebook pages are created specifically for the public promotion of brands, celebrities, businesses, causes, and politicians. Hundreds of Facebook pages emerged during the 2016 election to highlight political candidates.

Also common during the 2016 campaign season was the use of memes—one of the newest genres in political humor. Dawkins (2006) defines memes as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (p. 192). However, his original definition has evolved over time, particularly with the rise of the Internet and social media (Dynel, 2016, p. 662). Frequently featuring pop culture icons, images, and narratives, memes often include pictures juxtaposed with text that are replicated until the pictures transcend the importance of the original posting and its underlying work (Dynel, 2016; Shifman, 2013). Internet memes offer the creative use of digital content to allow individuals to spread ideas, establish community, and participate in culture (Silvestri, 2013).

Wiggins and Bowers (2015) offer history and context of the evolution of the term, meme. According to the authors, the term “has mutated and been appropriated and repurposed since its beginning.” Memes frequently include an image along with a slogans, catchphrases, fashion, learned skills, and so on. Dawkins saw the gene as a metaphor for the meme much like genes, which are ubiquitous and essential to evolution.

The study of memes is important because political humor has two major social functions (Nilsen, 1990). First, memes serve politicians in defining political concepts, disarming critics, and relieving tension. Second, they let political critics express their criticism. Scholars have demonstrated the influence of memes in different contexts, particularly their power to change public opinion and to promote social movements (Harlow, 2013; Hristova, 2014; Sci & Dare, 2014). Memes

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have been studied from various other perspectives including definition of the term and the role memetic texts have played in political debate, protests, and online conversations (i.e., Dawkins, 2006; Hristova, 2014; Kilpinen, 2008; Shifman, 2013; Spitzberg, 2014; Wang & Wang, 2015). Wiggins (2017) breaks ground with regard to pointing scholars in the direction of memes and the 2016 presidential election.

However, gaps remain in our understanding of how citizens may use memes to share grassroots political ideas in a social media group setting during elections. To help inform the growing body of research on memes, this study analyzes the memes that emerged during the 2016 US presidential race. Specifically, it examines how individuals used Facebook profile memes to spread information regarding now President Donald Trump and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

This study is important for several reasons—most notably—previous studies on US presidential candidates have primarily emphasized the study of newspaper and television portrayals (e.g., Curnalia & Mermer, 2014; Rowe, 2009) and negativity in presidential campaigning (e.g., Grofman & Skaperdas, 1995; Haynes & Rhine, 1998; Theilmann & Wilhte, 1998; Wicks, Souley, & Verser, 2003). Studies emphasizing photographic images of presidential candidates are rare (e.g., Glassman Kenney, 1994; Moriarty & Garramone, 1986; Moriarty & Popovich, 1991). Even less common are studies of meme representations of US presidents on social media platforms. Researchers have turned to studies that evaluate the effectiveness of social media platforms in sharing political messages. In their evaluation of conventional wisdom about social media and its applicability to political campaigns, Metzgar and Maruggi (2009) concluded social media’s strength lies in its communal nature and lack of strict hierarchies. “Campaigns that embrace this lack of hierarchy, rather than fight it, are more likely to reap the benefits the technology can offer” (p. 161).

Studies of grassroots efforts to share messages on social media become even more important as audiences rely on the platform than traditional media for information about candidates. As indicated by Metzgar and Maruggi (2009), campaigns must change with emerging technologies and go “where the voters are going and employing the tools the voters are using still out there.” The literature must continue to study elections in new media environments.

Literature Review

This review of the literature includes three broad areas of research: medium theory, candidate representations, and memes/social media platforms. A literature review exploring these topics provides a framework for understanding this study. Throughout the 2016 US presidential primaries and general election, citizens turned to social media outlets to share content about Clinton and Trump. The use of memes was common (Wiggins, 2017).

Medium Theory

This study approaches the following core topics from a medium theory perspective. Medium theory is most associated with Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Harold Innis (1964). The nutshell of the theory is most often given by, “The medium is the message.” McLuhan expanded his theory by arguing that throughout human history, social changes have followed technological advancements in media. For example, the invention of the printing press resulted in certain social changes that evolved around the affordances of faster, standardized, and more accessible information in the form of printed documents.

Innis (1964), on the other hand, pointed out through his research that there is an inherent bias of communication that ultimately centralizes power in the hands of technological elites. Today, medium theory scholars use the theory as a perspective to understand the emergence of new media, particularly social media. The Internet has transformed the election environment tremendously over the last decade. Communication via new media outlets such as the Internet challenges traditional communication theories, particularly in the areas of gatekeeper and audience roles. Facebook Pages, for example, provide a collaborative interface for participants from different geographical regions to communicate with one another. Facebook users have taken advantage of the platform to express either support or opposition for political candidates, forming political collectives online.

Studies document trends in how both candidates and voters use the web to share and consume political messages. Verser and Wicks (2006) analyzed how candidates made the transition from television to new media platforms. The two noted the 2000 presidential election marked a turning point in which candidates expanded the use of Internet technologies to the political campaigning process. During the early stages of Internet use for campaigning, politicians used online platforms to provide citizens and media outlets with news, background information, online photographs, video clips, and other materials. In another study of the 2008 US presidential election, Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver (2010) noted that “more than 1,000 groups had been created for each of the two major-party political candidates John McCain and Barack Obama by Election Day in 2008.” While it remains unclear whether the role of social media during the 2008 election had a major contributing role in the election of Obama, it is clear that the robustness of Obama’s social media campaign outmatched his contemporaries.

Comparatively, statistics indicate voters increasingly use the web during election campaigns to gather information about a particular candidate and to voice their opinions on key issues. A 2009 Pew study indicated three-quarters (74%) of Internet users went online during the 2008 election to participate in, or to get news and information regarding the 2008
US presidential campaign. This represents 55% of the entire adult population (Smith, 2009). More recently, a 2016 Pew report indicated 44% of US adults reported having learned about the 2016 presidential election from social media, out-pacing both local and national print newspapers (“Candidates Differ in Their Use of Social Media to Connect with the Public,” 2016).

Memes

Facebook provides a participatory platform that allows anyone to display memes and contribute to political dialog (Mina, 2014). The communicative value of memes has led political parties, leaders, and institutions to integrate them in their strategies (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016; Wiggins, 2017). Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero (2016) assert that the memetic potential of some profiles is based on the “size of online communities but above all on higher engagement of these followers with a specific party-leader” (p. 157). Furthermore, Wiggins (2017) argues that memes are not just digital artifacts of public opinion, but are also consumable, collectible, and shareable objects of political discourse. In other words, memes are more than mere Internet satire; rather, they embody the generative force and public opinion of the body politic on social media. Knobel (2006) adds that the study of political memes allows researchers to understand behaviors and actions, both in terms of the political parties that create them and the citizens who attach value to them.

Illustrating the importance of memes in political races, former US President Barack Obama was labeled the “memocrat” because of his use of memes to communicate political messages (Rodriguez, 2013). Howley (2016) analyzed the “I Have a Drone” meme, which addressed Obama’s targeted killing program. Howley (2016) hoped to better understand the role political memes play in condensing complex ideas into smaller packets. Findings indicate that while the counter-meme, “I Have a Drone,” may not have mobilized mass demonstrations against the US targeted-killing program, it became a fixture at anti-war protests across the globe.

The popularity of memes continued during the 2016 Presidential race. Chmielewski (2016) concluded both political parties embraced certain memes as a “shorthand way to share inside jokes with supporters, spread campaign messages or deliver rhetorical gut punches to their opponent, while distancing themselves from the most hateful.” The author adds,

In a presidential race where social media drives much of the political conversation, Internet memes have emerged as the lingua franca of the modern campaign. Those humorous images, short videos and slogans ricochet across Twitter and Facebook with the speed of an irresistible piece of celebrity gossip. They deliver instant commentary on, say, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump’s debate-night sniffles or Democratic rival Hillary Clinton’s shimmy.

The memes that emerged during the 2016 presidential race offer the opportunity to explore the intersection of politics and social media in the 21st Century. Memes offer an indication of how users co-responded to these spheres of influence (Spitzberg, 2014; Wiggins, 2017).

Grassroots Use of Memes

Previous studies on the grassroots use of memes indicate participatory media have been central to 21st-Century movements, including Occupy Wall Street (OWS), Black Lives Matter, and the 2016 Women’s March. Huntington (2015) adds, “In democratic and nondemocratic societies, citizens use memes to react, critique, protest, and speak truth to power.”

Milner (2013) examined how memes were used to articulate perspectives on OWS. The study’s key findings indicated memes facilitated conversation between diverse positions using hashtags on Twitter, subreddits on reddit, tumblogs on Tumblr, and videos on YouTube. Using these platforms, citizens spread the movement’s message and mobilized support. OWS initially garnered little traditional media attention, but had an active core of grassroots participants disseminating its message via social media outlets like Twitter and YouTube (Milner, 2013).

Political memes are used to critique and comment on social and political issues, from elections, to food stamps, police violence, and issues of equality (Huntington, 2015). Luqiu (2018) concluded the Internet enabled citizens to participate in the manufacturing of online counter-hegemony discourse. The process of participation provided grassroots bargaining power against the dominant discourse.

Visual Representations of Candidates

In addition to platform type, previous studies of political candidates have emphasized visual imagery of political candidates. Graber (1988) concluded pictures are valuable in shaping attitudes about people because they can be used to convey a sense of credibility, gain the attention of audience members, and evoke feelings. American political candidates have historically tried to persuade citizens to cast a vote for them by presenting themselves in a visually appealing manner (Verser & Wicks, 2006).

Scholars have noted the importance of political cartoons in disseminating persuasive messages (Conners, 2005; Fernando, 2013; Medhurst & DeSouza, 1981). In her examination of political cartoons, Conners (2005) concluded cartoonists must make reference to other events or images for readers to receive and digest the message quickly for political cartoon images to be comprehended and appreciated. For instance, if readers are familiar with Star Wars’
Darth Vader and can recognize his qualities in a political cartoon image of Cheney, they may attribute qualities of the character to the individual featured. Similarly, Fernando (2013) concluded one needs to be familiar with the literary or cultural sources to which political cartoons refer to decode editorial cartoons.

Glassman and Kenney (1994) suggested a list of items to examine in presidential campaign photographs. These elements refer to whether a candidate is portrayed as happy, confident, caring, strong, determined, interested, or enthusiastic (cited in Lee, Ryan, Wanta, & Chang, 2004). The categories include “glad to see you”: waving, pointing, shaking hands, and giving a thumbs-up; and “beloved leader”: being applauded or otherwise praised, such as being presented a gift or award. Two studies by Moriarty and colleagues uncovered unbalanced depictions of presidential candidates. In the 1988 US election, Moriarty and Popovich (1991) found George Bush was shown more positively than Michael Dukakis on facial expression, but Dukakis was shown more positively on camera angle.

The general consensus of media studies is Americans are living in an era in which candidates do not have complete control over media messages (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010, p. 555). The two add, “The individual viewer in a campaign crowd with a cell phone can record a candidate’s gaffe, post it on YouTube or Flickr, and within days millions will be gasping or guffawing.”

Gender and Stereotypes

The study of gender and stereotyping is useful in an analysis of media coverage of Clinton because of media’s dual ability to reinforce unequal status quo relationships, as well as to circulate new ideas and to help set progressive (or regressive) political agendas. The promotion of gender stereotypes and resentments toward women can be detrimental in political campaigns. Stereotyping, misrepresentation, and under-representation of women occur either because of overall gender insensitivity or because of symbolic annihilation by lack of coverage.

Thus, studying gender stereotyping enables scholars to reveal how media shape the political campaigns of female candidates. Previous research indicates that although media offer male and female candidates equal amounts of coverage, they do not give them the same type of coverage. Typically, coverage of male candidates focuses on their policy and history in office, while coverage of female candidates focuses more on their personality and appearance (Devitt, 2002; Freedman & Fico, 2005).

Meeks expands on this female–male disparity by identifying patterns of female candidate stereotyping in media content. Likewise, other scholars have found that media focus more attention on female candidates’ gender, children, and marital status, framing their ability to hold political office in terms of their roles as mothers and wives. Similarly, studies indicate journalists depict women with “gendering” frames. In addition, Curnalia and Mermer (2014) identify gender stereotypes and news framing surrounding an “emotional moment” that simultaneously promoted and inhibited Hilary Clinton’s success during the 2008 primary.

Herrnson et al. (2003) concluded women gain a strategic advantage when they run “as women,” stressing issues that voters associate favorably with female candidates and targeting female voters. The researchers argue women can use gender stereotypes to their advantage by stressing issues that voters associate favorably with female candidates and by targeting female voters. Previous studies have emphasized traditional media platforms such as newspapers and broadcast media; however, this study emphasizes user-generated content and grassroots efforts.

Facebook and Politics

Social media are “a set of online tools designed to enable and promote social interactions” (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martin, & del Carmen Caba-Pérez, 2018). Among the most powerful of these tools, and with more than a billion active users, Facebook is a dominant online force that enables its users to shape public perceptions and political conversations on a global scale (Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010; Woolley et al., 2010).

Aside from the typical entry point of the personal profile, Facebook also offers Pages and Groups as additional methods of social engagement. Facebook Pages allow organizations and public figures, such as political parties and politicians, to engage with and enable direct access to their constituency:

Anyone with a Facebook account can create a Page or help manage one, as long as they have a role on the Page. People who like a Page can get updates about the Page, such as posts, photos or videos, in their News Feed. (Facebook, 2018)

In contrast, Facebook Groups provide a digital arena to specifically connect to other users with common interests, beliefs (Facebook, 2018), for example, political affiliation.

In addition to candidates using Facebook to share their political platforms, supporters use the platform to influence their followers. This study draws on these considerations with respect to politics, social media, and Internet memes. Building on this review of the literature, this study addresses the following questions:

RQ1. What types of Facebook-meme pages emerged during the 2016 US presidential race and how popular were they?

RQ2. What was the overall tone of US presidential candidate Facebook-meme pages?

RQ3. How did US presidential candidate Facebook-meme pages differ in their representations of the facial expressions of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton during the presidential race?
**RQ4.** How did US presidential candidate Facebook-meme pages differ in overall sentiment toward Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton?

**Methods**

Memes are of interest because social media platforms were heavily used to help spread the word about the 2016 political race. To get a sense of Clinton and Trump’s portrayal on Facebook, the researchers used the keywords “memes,” “Hillary Clinton,” and “Donald Trump” to gather a sample of Facebook-meme pages using Facebook’s built-in search function. Following the 2016 election, dozens of Facebook-meme pages spotlighted Trump and Clinton; however, more pages emphasized Trump (92 pages) than Clinton (53 pages). For this study, we looked at an equal number of Clinton- and Trump-themed Facebook-meme pages for a total sample of 106 pages (n = 53 for Clinton; n = 53 for Trump). We gathered the Trump meme-themed sample by collecting the top 53 pages that occurred in our search.

The rationale for using Facebook Pages to collect memes is these were commonly shared across social media platforms and they provide a snapshot of grassroots political campaigning on Facebook. They also provide insight into what Americans cared about during the election. Memes were collected 1 month after the general election.

The coding scheme of Glassman and Kenney (1994) was adopted to carry out the study. The two used their study to categorize photos of presidential candidates during three elections. The coding task was shared by two trained coders—the primary investigator and a graduate student. Based on 18.9% (n = 20) of the sampled Facebook-meme pages, the overall inter-coder reliability was determined to be 83%, which included all variables in our study.

The unit of analysis was the text and photos of each presidential Facebook-meme page. In the first step of our analysis, we evaluated tone by coding each Facebook-meme page for the overall sentiment of the profile picture used to promote the page. We selected positive, negative, or neutral based on the content of the profile photo and accompanying. Photos and text of the candidates’ meme pages depicting them negative were coded as negative. Similarly, photos of the two candidates depicting them positively were coded as positive.

Next, we looked at the content of the pages’ profile photo for the following: image of Trump, Clinton, or some other person. Images of Trump and Clinton were further categorized by their facial expression and hand gestures. The presidential Facebook-meme pages were coded on the following variables:

- Facial expression: digitally distorted, goofy, happy, official photo, serious, or none;
- Sentiment: pro-Clinton or Trump, anti-Clinton or Trump; neutral, or other;
- Facebook Page type: book, company, comedian, community, entertainment, fictional character, government official, just for fun, magazine, media/news company, nonprofit, organization, other, performance art, political figure, public figure, and website. These categories were pulled directly from the Facebook-meme page search results.

Facebook profile descriptions and photos were individually evaluated to analyze these key areas. Chi-squares were computed to examine potential differences among the Clinton and Trump Facebook-meme pages. Distinctive themes emerged based on the similarity of ideas that helped us reach conclusions on how Facebook pages were used to characterize presidential candidates during the 2016 election.

**Findings**

**Background**

Hillary Clinton, who confirmed on 12 April 2015, she was running for president in 2016, announced her candidacy in a video and on her Facebook Page (Miller, 2015). The former secretary of state, senator, and first lady stated, “Americans have fought their way back from tough economic times. But the deck is still stacked in favor of those at the top. Everyday Americans need a champion, and I want to be that champion.” A few months later, Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the US presidency at Trump Tower on 16 June 2015. “Sadly the American dream is dead,” Trump said at the end of his speech. “But if I get elected president, I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before” (Diamond, 2015).

The Clinton-Trump race was heavily contested. In the end, Trump defeated Clinton in electoral votes, but not in popular votes; more Americans voted for Hillary Clinton than any other losing presidential candidate in US history (CNN, 2016). Clinton received almost 2.9 million more votes than Trump, according to revised and certified final election results from all 50 states and the District of Columbia (CNN, 2016).

**Facebook Meme-Themed Pages and Their Popularity**

The first research question asked what types of Facebook-meme pages emerged during the 2016 election and how popular were they. Facebook-meme page users communicated through pictures, caricatures, and digitally manipulated images of Clinton and Trump. Followers posted memes that linked to news articles and videos (Figures 1 and 2). Of the 53 Trump-related pages, the most prominent themes were “Just for fun” (n = 28, 26.4%), “Political Campaign” (n = 8, 7.5%), and “Dank Trump Memes” (n = 5, 4.7%). Comparatively, the
most prominent themes among Clinton-related pages were “Political” (n=9, 8.5%), “Crooked Hillary” (n=9, 8.5%), and “Dank Clinton Memes” (n=6, 5.7%).

Pages that include the word dank in the title were popular for both candidates. According to the Urban Dictionary, a “dank meme” is one that is just “really radical, cool and neat.” One of the more popular pages titled, “President Trump’s Dank Meme Stash,” had 42,893 members. So-called “dank” memes were also common for Clinton. Similar to Trump dank memes, the memes in the sample focused on Clinton’s campaign platform and image-related problems such as her husband’s affair with Monica Lewinsky and email scandal.

Next, we addressed how many likes each page garnered. Most pages in our Trump sample had between 201 and 300 followers (n=6). The next highest categories were: 0–100 (n=5), 101–200 (n=5), and 301–400 (n=5). The page with the highest following in the Trump sample had more than 22,000,000 followers. On the other hand, most Clinton pages had between 0 and 100 followers (n=22), 201 and 300 (n=6), and 101 and 200 (n=4). The page with the highest following in the Clinton sample had more than 9,900,000 followers. The median number of followers for Clinton pages was 184 with an interquartile range of 1,094, while Trump pages had a median of 666 followers with an interquartile range of 3,482. In other words, Clinton Facebook-meme pages averaged fewer followers than Trump Facebook-meme pages, and the number of followers for Trump pages demonstrated more variation than those of Clinton pages.

Table 1. Tone of Clinton and Trump Facebook-Meme Pages by Frequency and Percentage.

| Meme Tone | Presence | Neutral | Positive | Total |
|-----------|----------|---------|----------|-------|
| Clinton   | 24 22.6% | 11 10.4% | 18 17.0% | 53 50.0% |
| Trump     | 20 18.9% | 14 13.2% | 19 17.9% | 53 50.0% |
| Total     | 44 41.5% | 25 23.6% | 37 34.9% | 106 100.0% |

χ² (2, n = 106) = 0.751, p = .687.

Tone of Clinton and Trump Facebook-Meme Pages

The second research question asked what was the overall tone of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Facebook-meme pages? Of the 106 presidential election Facebook-meme pages in our sample, 44 were negative, while 37 were positive, and the remaining 25 were neutral (Table 1). Overall, Clinton and Trump Facebook-meme pages leaned toward the negative; however, the difference was not significant (see Table 1).

Positive pages for both candidates focused on the two candidates’ strengths and leadership skills—Clinton (n=18, 17.0%) and Trump (n=19, 17.9%). Trump was depicted as patriotic; Clinton was depicted as a leader. More commonly, pages for both candidates were negative with 22.6% of Clinton’s pages and 18.9% of Trump’s pages demonstrating negativity.
For instance, Clinton-themed pages often included the idea she is crooked and out-of-touch with average citizens (Figure 3). Some lamented the loss of Bernie Sanders as a contender for the Democratic ticket. Profile photos for Clinton meme pages were also likely to emphasize the email scandal, Clinton’s wealth, and her husband, former US President Bill Clinton. One meme stated, “Silly Americans: Laws are for poor people,” while another featured Clinton wearing sunglasses (or shades) and looking at her cell phone and presumably her email. The sunglasses suggest a coolness surrounding the email scandal. Other memes highlighted Clinton’s relationship with her husband and his relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

One meme features Clinton with a cigar in her mouth wearing a cap that states “Obey.” Another meme includes a photo of Bill Clinton that states “I knew ud b back.” Comparatively, Trump-themed pages questioned his leadership skills, physical features (such as hairstyle and skin tone), and lack of political skills (Figure 4).

Shifman (2013) observed “meme-based political discourse often begins with a single ‘memetic photo’ that relates to political actors and controversies” (p. 138). For instance, in this political race, Trump’s comb-over was memed frequently. One photo makes reference to the gospel song, “We Shall Overcome,” in the caption, “We Shall Overcomb,” referring to Trump’s hairstyle. Facebook users shared the same and different photos with captions that focused on Trump’s hairstyle. References to Trump’s hairstyle are noteworthy because media messages traditionally have emphasized the physical features of women, while ignoring those of men. To express viewpoints on Trump’s physical attractiveness, the Facebook profile photos in our sample frequently referred to popular culture icons, TV shows, and movies—a common tactic for memes. For instance, in reference to his tan, some memes referred to the popular television show, “Orange is the New Black.” Memes also compared the future president facial features to animals, such as frogs, and cartoon characters, such as “Shrek.”

**Facial Expressions in Memes**

The third research question asked how did Facebook-meme pages differ in their representation of the facial expressions of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential race? In general, Facebook-meme pages featured profile photos in which the two candidates appeared serious, with 31 of the pages (29.2%) falling in this category. In this category, the candidate’s face was devoid of a smile or goofy look. The appearance of being happy was the next most common category with 25 pages (23.6%) in our sample falling in this category (Table 2). Another prominent facial expression for the candidates was goofy (n=18, 17.0%). Memes in this category featured Trump and Clinton making goofy facial expressions, which were facial expressions that were absurdist and that tended toward eliciting humor.

While there is a significant difference in the facial expressions profile photos of the two candidate’s Facebook-meme pages, this test cannot be considered reliable because 33%
of cells have expected counts less than 5. Therefore, we cannot confidently claim there is a difference between the Facebook-meme pages of the two candidates in terms of facial expressions.

### Sentiment in Clinton and Trump Meme Pages

Regarding research question four, which gauged sentiment, there were 25 (23.6%) anti-Clinton pages and 26 (24.5%) anti-Trump meme pages (Table 3). Conversely, we see pro-Clinton pages were 17 (16.0%), while pro-Trump pages were 18 (16.9%). In other words, the number of Facebook-meme pages that were either for or against Clinton or Trump were reasonably the same. Worth noting is while there is statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 86.392$, $df = 5$, $n = 106$, $p < .0001$) in the sentiment of Clinton and Trump Facebook-meme pages, the pages were almost inverse in their depictions of the two candidates.

Clinton meme-themed pages were more likely to include profile photos featuring memes with negative or anti-Clinton themes (47.2%), while Trump meme-themed pages were more likely to include profile photos featuring memes with a negative or anti-Trump themes (49.1%). Conversely, many of the pages include a positive or pro-Clinton theme (32.1%), while Trump meme-themed pages were more likely to include profile photos featuring memes with a positive or pro-Trump theme (34.0%). The remaining presidential Facebook-meme pages were likely to be neutral or other for both candidates.

### Discussion

Study findings provide a general overview of Facebook user depictions of Clinton and Trump, which is helpful in understanding how grassroots, or user-generated, memes are used during elections to replicate and share messages that may influence how people vote. Most prominently, results denote two of the four variables (facial expression and hand gesture) analyzed in our study indicated a weak, but significant, difference in the Facebook-meme pages of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The two other variables indicated very little difference between how Facebook users depicted the two candidates using Facebook-meme pages.

Findings regarding the second research question indicate the overall tone of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Facebook-meme pages was negative, closely followed by positive. However, the difference was not statistically significant. The response to the third research question, which asked how Facebook-meme pages differed in their representation of the facial expressions of the candidates, indicated both Trump and Clinton were generally depicted in a serious manner. Worth noting is while there was a significant difference in the facial expressions profile photos of the two candidate’s Facebook-meme pages, this test cannot be considered reliable.

Comparatively, in response to the fourth question, which addressed sentiment, the sentiment variable indicates there were more anti-Clinton and anti-Trump than pro-Clinton and pro-Trump memes. In addition, memes are least likely to be neutral across all observations. While there is statistical significance in the sentiment of Clinton and Trump Facebook-meme pages; the pages were almost inverse in their depictions of the two candidates.

### Conclusion

This article explored the differences in Facebook political meme-themed groups that emerged during the 2016
US presidential campaign. It identified several themes and representations of Facebook pages featuring Clinton and Trump. As indicated in the introduction, previous studies on US presidential candidates have primarily emphasized the study of newspaper and television portrayals, negativity in presidential campaigning and photographic images of presidential candidates are rare. Less common are studies of meme representations of US presidents on social media platforms. This study is one of the first to offer a glimpse at the types of Facebook pages that emerged during the political race, profile photos used, popularity of the pages, and an examination of how citizens used humor during the 2016 election in an effort to influence voter decisions.

Several important implications surfaced. First, referring back to the review of the literature, scholars have demonstrated the influence of memes and their power to promote social movements (Harlow, 2013; Hristova, 2014; Sci & Dare, 2014). Our findings indicate Facebook political-themed meme pages enable average citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers to share user-generated content. In this case, Facebook users shared political memes with end-users who were able to comment, share, and repost content in real time. Facebook users expressed their opinions with people who shared similar beliefs. The citizen-generated pages in our sample tended to promote the positive attributes of the group’s preferred candidates, while emphasizing the negative attributes of their preferred candidate’s opponent. This is important because Facebook’s large membership base allows users to share ideas with a large audience that, at one time, might have remained isolated.

Second, traditionally, media outlets have operated simultaneously as gatekeepers and interpreters of political themes by selectively choosing to cover one or both sides of an issue, often putting forth their own interpretations of issues. However, with social media, creators take on the role of gatekeeper. Facebook meme-themed pages contain participants from different geographical regions who collaborate in expressing political opinions about presidential candidates. Study findings are particularly relevant given the tremendous popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Some scholars predict user-generated content (UGC) may eventually displace traditional broadcast media as the main outlet for news and entertainment.

Third, gender stereotypes mentioned in the literature review were not as common in Facebook-meme pages used to depict the candidates as anticipated. Clinton-meme pages were more likely to focus on her email scandal and wealth, while those featuring Trump focused on his campaign promises and physical appearance—often emphasizing his hairdo, physical features, and skin tone. The lack of physical appearance-related frames targeting Clinton in the study sample indicates the use of gender stereotypes of female candidates was not as common as they have been historically—particularly in newspaper and television coverage (e.g., Devere and Davies, 2006).

However, worth noting is while the memes in our sample did not highlight Clinton’s physical appearance, they often targeted her relationship with her husband, former President Bill Clinton. References were made to his relationship with his former intern, Monica Lewinsky, cigars and the couple’s rocky marriage. Conversely, memes did not refer to Trump’s wife, Melania, or their relationship. These findings are illuminating, as the study of social media usage sheds light on trends of representations of gender and adds to the literature content that researchers may use to gauge progress in representations of gender, politics, and social media platforms.

Fourth, true to the literature review, the profile photo memes in sample built upon pop culture images found in media images, movies, and television shows—such as Orange is the New Black and Shrek. Most notably, Trump’s comb-over was replicated in images that compared him to television and comic characters. Comparatively, Clinton memes stemmed from news coverage of various incidents. In particular, she was displayed with a cigar in her mouth in reference to her husband Bill Clinton’s Monica Lewinsky scandal. She was also shown using her cell phone with reference made to her email scandal.

Profile photos offer a glimpse at Facebook page behavior, but digging deeper into the content shared would offer a deeper understanding. Future studies might further explore these themes and include an analysis of the individual memes shared to candidate Facebook-meme pages. Also of interest might be follow-up study to assess if memes influenced the types of stories published in newspapers or on network news. Such a study might also be paired with an agenda-setting study to find out how consumers used such information to make their decisions on what to publish.

As mass media continue to transform, the need to study group interactions in new media environments increases in importance. Further research on political memes is important as, undoubtedly, social media platforms will continue to play an important role in future campaigns. Citizens and politicians must be aware of the dynamics at play on social media platforms such as Facebook. Scholars must continue to test all communication paradigms in new media environments. This study provides a valuable springboard that may be used to continue this vein of research.

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