It's Obviously Funny to be a Meme:
Viewing, Sharing, and Creating Memes
for Political Entertainment and Observation

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Memes are cultural units that transmit among online users. Appearing as jokes, memes are a popular form of expression and appear to serve a greater role in the formation and spread of public opinion, changing the way citizens engage with politics. Driven by uses and gratifications theory, this work examines users' motivations for viewing, sharing, and creating political memes. A nationwide survey (N = 1,000) of Facebook users identified unique gratifications obtained from political memes use. Results show the uses of politically-related memes are nuanced behaviors strategically done to fulfill needs for political entertainment and observation. Specifically, individuals with high political trust, who think of themselves as being humorous, and those who frequently share or create memes used them to observe politics in action. Alternatively, those who prefer to observe humorous circumstances and frequently share and view memes, without engaging in creation, used politically-related memes for entertainment. Practical and theoretical implications regarding use of memes for engagement and effects are discussed.

Keywords: political memes, uses & gratifications, political entertainment, political observation

M emes are pieces of online content, often created with the intent to be humorous and entertaining, that spread among online users (Shifman, 2013). While they have become a common source of online commentary, memes are also used to comment on important political and/or social issues. Political memes regularly showcase aspects of contemporary cultural politics, especially in the United States (Howley, 2016). In fact, the public has seen the former reality show entertainer and former U.S. President, Donald Trump, communicating online with memes, many of which are supplied and shared by his supporters (Staley, 2019).

Memes are entertaining and increasingly popular, making them visual objects that are regularly encountered by social media users. They intrigue users due to their spectacle

and the funny and entertaining ones spread rapidly online. Memes that reference politics represent a new form of political entertainment, reminiscent of political satire (Piata, 2016), while seemingly representing a new form of political engagement.

Memes referencing political figures regularly circulate social media platforms with the intent to mock proposed policies and actions or to embolden supporters (Covucci, 2018). In fact, the power of political memes has been noticed by political campaigns (Staley, 2019) and professional design elements are seen in meme production, especially in political advertising and marketing (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). There is evidence that memes referencing political figures and events are used to influence public opinion in political campaigns (Siegel, 2017). Thus, political memes appear to have the potential of visual propaganda, capable of igniting real actions related to political and social issues. This possibility demands further research.

Empirical research on memes tends to use critical analysis or network analysis to study characteristics or speculate on their transmission (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). However, limited research has investigated users' motivations for using and gratifications obtained from political memes. This study uses a nation-wide survey of Facebook users to investigate needs that motivate social media users to engage with political memes and the gratifications obtained from viewing, sharing, and creating memes that reference important political and/or social issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Memes

Memes became popular between the late 1990s to early 2000s (Börzsei, 2013), but the concept of meme originated from British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) who claimed behavior is influenced by surrounding culture and genes. Through this perspective, culture is a unit, similar to a gene, that transcends generations through imitation. A meme refers to non-genetic behaviors and cultural ideas that transfer between people (Davison, 2012). Although Dawkins (1976) was hesitant to apply a biological term to media content and its networked distribution, he agreed that the mechanisms operated similarly (Salon, 2013).

The mixture of text and/or images, known as memes, can manifest in different formats, such as a still image or animated GIF (Börzsei, 2013). Individuals who create memes are often anonymous or pseudonymous and the production and circulation of memes is an easy task that has potential for mass distribution (Gal, 2018). Although the formats of memes vary, they are commonly seen as digital images with superimposed text and/or multiple images that have been intermixed to produce a new piece of content. Images with superimposed text are the most common format (Bratich, 2014; Shifman, 2014). Ultimately, they are a multi-layered and intertextual combination of images and text and rely on the interplay between words and images (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016).

Memes tend to appear spontaneously and spread continually, while transforming along the way (Börzsei, 2013). The proliferation of memes has occurred alongside the development of new technologies, especially social media (Gal, 2018). Social media platforms encourage participation in the network by sharing content, which aids meme dissemination. For example, 69% of U.S. adults use Facebook and are likely to see and/or share memes daily (Perrin & Anderson, 2019; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015)

While the remixed nature of memes is fundamental to their definition, memes also have certain agreed upon characteristics. For instance, memes often appear as jokes that spread among online users and continually evolve (Davison, 2012; Shifman, 2013). Memes are also a common method of digital expression that are considered units of popular culture (Börzsei, 2013; Shifman, 2013). Therefore, memes are more than jokes or useless content because they are created with references that have deeper cultural meaning (Gal, 2018).

Political Memes. While memes can reference any type of cultural phenomenon, one popular form of memes are those used to talk about serious political and/or social topics (Milner, 2013). When memes are used to discuss serious social or political topics, they can be referred to as political memes, which articulate perspectives and are considered a form of political engagement (Shifman, 2014). They tend to reference "government leaders, candidates, policies, positions, forms of political action (e.g., protest, voting), or related subjects with superimposed text and/or a mixture of edited images" (Gearhart et al., 2020, p. 370).

Previous research prefers examining the characteristics of memes and what values they are presenting (Huntington, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Although seldom research looks at how audiences use memes to satisfy their political needs, it has been pointed out that studies should apply uses and gratifications to investigate the effects of political humor on audiences who construct meaning (Young, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to investigate the unique gratifications obtained from viewing, sharing, or creating memes to engage in politics, especially their use for political entertainment and the surveillance of politics in action.
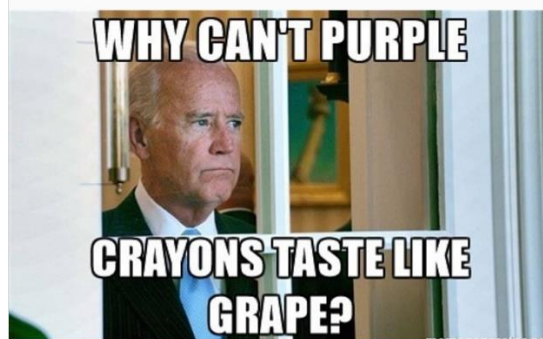

Figure 1. Example of Political Meme Poking fun at a Politician

Figure 2. Example of a Political Meme Referencing a Political Issue

Uses & Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory posits that media use is motivated and purposive, indicating that audiences have a reason for engaging with content (Katz et al., 1973; Palmgreen et al., 1980; Rubin, 2009). The theory aims to understand why audiences actively seek certain media to satisfy their needs, which drives media consumption based on satisfying personal needs (Palmgreen et al., 1980). Gratifications can be conceptualized as need satisfaction, which is obtained by using media to meet social and/or psychological

needs (Katz et al., 1973). This ideally culminates in audiences having their gratifications fulfilled and/or experiencing some other type of consequence from their media exposure. Thus, audiences' motivations (i.e., needs) are the driving force for media consumption, allowing gratifications to be fulfilled from media use (Katz et al., 1973).

Early investigators have looked at audience motives for media use but not the effects (Lazarsfeld, 1940). In the 1970s, Katz et al. (1973) started to connect media effects with users' social and psychological needs. This theory tries to link media use motives with media attitudes and behaviors, newer media, social and psychological consequences (Rubin, 2009). The theory has continued to evolve while adapting to new forms of communication technology. More personalized gratifications have been identified through adapted measurement to investigate the consumption of different media, including the internet and social media (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Lee & Ma, 2012). For example, Lee and Ma (2012) found that people who are motivated by information seeking are more likely to share news on their social media pages.

Two major groups of gratifications from media exposure have been identified (McQuail et al., 1972; Rubin, 2009). First, individuals consume media for entertainment and pleasure. Entertainment media allows individuals the opportunity for diversion, allowing an escape from routine and burdens of ordinary life (McQuail et al., 1972). Consuming media for entertainment can also help social and psychological aspects of individuals' lives through building connections with others via media (Katz et al., 1973). For example, being entertained from text messaging can enhance connections with family and friends (Leung & Wei, 2000). Social media use has also been found to satisfy the need for social interaction and for expressing feelings and thoughts while entertaining (Ruggiero, 2000).

Second, users consume media to satisfy their need for observation, which creates a sense of being aware of what happens around individuals. This includes surveillance, information seeking, and knowledge acquisition through varying mediums including newspapers (Ruggiero, 2000), television news (Rubin, 1983), and radio (Rubin & Step, 2000). Surveillance is a key gratification sought by television news viewers (McQuail et al., 1972). The items used to identify gratification of surveillance in previous research

have been modified to measure similar gratification obtained from newer media such as social media (Palmgreen et al., 1980).

This audience-centered theory has also been applied to explain why individuals participate in creating content besides consuming content online (Lu & Fan, 2018) such as fan-based fictions. Participatory culture states the phenomenon that individuals are not only consuming media content but also creating media content (Jenkins, 2006). Memes are one of the products from users' consumption and creation as well. In fact, user-generated social content such as memes has been found to generate psychological empowerment among users, which may serve as a gratification that individuals can obtain from using online content as a form of political engagement (Leung, 2009). Hence, there is reason to further explore the application of uses and gratifications theory to examine the use (i.e., viewing, sharing/posting, creating) of memes.

Memes for Political Engagement

Citizens increasingly engage with memes referencing political and/or social issues. These memes provide an opportunity to instantly share reactions to current issues and events (Börzsei, 2013). In democratic societies such as the U.S., memes have been used as a form of activism and a tool of resistance to critically evaluate political and social life (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). For example, memes were created to highlight police brutality during the Occupy Wall Street movement while other memes accused political figures of their financial relationships with banks (Milner, 2013). Memes also have the potential to impact public sentiment, a serious implication that political campaigns have begun to notice (Dyck, 2019). Thus, political engagement can be realized with memes, which can be used as appeals to change perceptions on political issues and figures. However, research has rarely examined politically-related psychological factors that may lead to varying uses of politically-related memes as political engagement.

Several key political beliefs related to political engagement that may lead to varying uses of political memes should be explored by integrating concepts into empirical tests of the theory such as political self-efficacy. Bandura (2010) defined self-efficacy as individuals' beliefs in their ability to achieve goals and impact others or events in their lives. Self-efficacy also plays an important role in how individuals participate in political activities such as commenting on political issues (Delli Carpini, 2004). Political self-

efficacy concerns an individuals' belief in their ability to participate in politics make a difference (Craig, 1979; Delli Carpini, 2004). Internal political efficacy is found to be positively associated with political expression on social media (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). As political memes touch on government policies, social problems, political events, and are a form of political expression, there is reason to speculate that political efficacy may drive their use. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: Does political self-efficacy differently relate to the use of political memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment?

Political trust is a political belief that impacts political engagement and may impact uses of political memes. Defined as "the anticipated quality of government outputs" (Craig, 1979, p. 229), political trust is also important for civic life. The establishment of trust is an important factor in accumulating social capital for civic engagement (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). For instance, people who trust others in community are more likely to engage in civic activities and cooperate with others, which can make communities function better (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Political trust is an important factor which evaluates people's confidence in the government's abilities of producing outcomes that meet their expectations and requirements. The level of political trust among individuals may have the ability to influence how they use political memes for political engagement. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: How does political trust relate to the use of political memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment?

Political Memes & Humor. Research has investigated how political satire and soft news such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report can convey political messages (e.g., Hollander, 2005; Kim & Vishak, 2008). Viewers of politically-satirical television do engage in more political discussion with their families and friends and participation in political events (Jones, 2009). Individuals who perceived the message to be funny are more likely to absorb the message, thus increasing its persuasive power by reducing counterarguments or scrutiny (Boukes et al., 2015).

Entertainment media can be a substantial source for political news, capable of igniting individuals' processing of political information (Kim & Vishak, 2008) and stimulating interest (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014), which influences one's level of political

knowledge in the long run. For instance, entertainment media (e.g., political film) has been found to be related to higher intent for political discussion (Landreville & LaMarre, 2011). Political humor in entertainment media can also strengthen political affiliation (Peifer & Holbert, 2016).

Holbert et al. (2014) pointed out that adding new types of media such as graphic novels or contemporary comic books can be one way to expand the study of political entertainment. Political memes have the potential to influence the public in ways similar to other forms of political entertainment, but this possibility may be disguised by the humorous nature and mundane circulation of memes (Segev et al., 2015). Yet, the features of political humor have been linked to memes and used to explain their function (Piata, 2016). For instance, memes use humorous messages to express political commentary or cynicism. As such, traditional forms of political humor have now extended to online settings where they may be anonymously produced, shared, and viewed by others.

The creation and circulation of politically humorous memes require individuals to have the ability to generate humor by themselves and perceive humor when they encounter memes. Need for humor is an individual trait that has been found to predict the use of self-mocking memes among Chinese youth (Lu & Fan, 2018). Two types of humor were identified including (a) internal humor, which is generated internally and seen through one's own ability to be funny; and (b) external humor, which is seen in those who seek humor from their external environment (Cline et al., 2003; Cline et al., 2011). These attributes led to the following research questions:

RQ3: How is the level of internal humor related to the use of political memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment?

RQ4: How is the level of external humor related to the use of political memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment?

Viewing, Sharing, & Creating Political Memes. Although memes can easily be consumed, created, and recreated by users across social media, it takes a different level of effort between viewing, sharing, and creating memes. According to the 90-9-1 rule, 90% of the online users are only viewing content, 9% of them are sometimes contributing content, and only 1% of the online users are actually creating content heavily (Nielsen, 2006). Research has shown this rule existed in the engagement level of online community groups

(Carron-Arthur et al., 2014). Social media is also a prime platform for the consumption and distribution of memes (Gal, 2018). Of course, viewing takes the least effort compared to sharing and creating content. In fact, members in Internet support groups primarily engage in viewing content, as opposed to sharing or creating (Carron-Arthur et al., 2014). As such, there is reason to believe that social media users who frequently engage in low-demand tasks, such as viewing or sharing memes, are doing so for entertainment purposes. Thus, the following hypotheses are posed:

H1: Individuals who frequently view political memes are: (a) more likely to use them to satisfy their need for political entertainment; and (b) less likely to use them for political observation.

H2: Individuals who frequently share political memes are: (a) more likely to use them to satisfy their need for political entertainment; and (b) less likely to use them for political observation.

Although the creation of memes "do not require high technological literacy," creating remixed shareable online content requires the most effort due to the time and creative demands of the task (Gal, 2018, p. 529). Therefore, content producers may have a vested interest in the social or political issue(s) addressed in a meme. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

H3: Individuals who frequently create political memes are: (a) more likely to use them to satisfy their need for political observation; and (b) less likely to use them for political entertainment.

METHODS

Participants & Procedure

Politically-related memes which are conceptualized as humorous online images that combine two or more pieces of digital content, including images with superimposed text, two images side-by-side, or multiple images merged to form a new unit. Using a survey hosted on Qualtrics, individual-level differences among users, their use of politically-related memes (i.e., creation, sharing/posting, or viewing), motivations, and gratifications obtained from the use of political memes among U.S. Facebook users was investigated.

Following approval from a university-affiliated Institutional Review Board, a purposive sample of Facebook users was collected on Amazon MTurk (MTurk). Participants were required to be adults and be located in the United States. The use of MTurk services has found to be a convenient way to access diverse non-student populations for a low-cost way in comparison to traditional panels (Kees et al., 2017). MTurk also offers the ability to reach specific populations based on the needs of data collection (Casler et al., 2013), which proved useful platform for finding political memes users.

Each respondent was incentivized to participate and paid $1.00 after completing the survey. No identifying information was collected from respondents and participation took about 12 minutes. An additional fee of $0.05 per participant was paid to Amazon MTurk to recruit only users that are active Facebook users. A total of 1,287 individuals voluntarily attempted to complete the survey. However, non-qualified respondents were identified based on their response to three screener questions which asked whether they are current U.S. residents, current Facebook users, and whether they have ever seen a meme referencing politics. Those not qualified were redirected, resulting in the final sample (N = 1,000).

Measures

Independent variables utilized in this test target: (a) political attitudes, including aspects of political trust, political self-efficacy, and political interest; (b) psychological attributes, including both their internal and external humor; (c) memes use, which was divided between viewing, posting/sharing, and creating politically-related memes; and (d) demographics that were used for control purposes.

Political Trust. Adopted from Chao et al. (2017), this item assesses each individual's level of political trust. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement to the following statements: (a) I trust Federal government; (b) I trust local government; (c) I trust state government; (d) I trust judges; and (e) I trust police (1= *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The five items were subjected to a reliability test to ensure internal consistency (α = .88). Next, these five items were merged to form an index (*M* = 4.22, *SD* = 1.28).

Political Self-efficacy. Adapted from Young (2013), this item measured each participant's level of internal political self-efficacy. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement to four statements including: (a) I consider myself to be well-qualified to participate in politics; (b) I think that I am better informed about politics than most people; (c) Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on; and (d) I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The four items were subjected to a reliability test to ensure internal consistency (α = .76) and were merged to form an index (M = 4.81, SD = 1.15).

Political Interest. Adapted from Young (2013), a single-item measure was used to assess political interest. Using a 7-Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all interested* to 7 = *extremely interested*), participants were asked how interested they are in what is going on with politics and public affairs (M = 3.84, SD = .94).

Internal Humor. Adapted from the need for levity scale (Cline et al., 2003; Cline et al., 2011), this item assesses perceptions of one's own ability to be funny or humorous. Measurement was assessed by asking participants to rate their level of agreement to three statements including: (a) I can crack people with the things I say; (b) I often say witty things; and (c) I am confident that I can make other people laugh (1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*). The three items were subjected to a reliability test to ensure internal consistency (α = .91) and merged to form an index (M = 5.27, SD = 1.23).

External Humor. Similar to above, this item measures the need to seek out humor from external sources (Cline et al., 2003; Cline et al., 2011). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement to three statements including: (a) I like situations where people can express their sense of humor; (b) I enjoy hearing someone tell a joke; and (c) I prefer my life to be filled with humor (1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*). The items were subjected to a reliability test to ensure internal consistency (α = .82) and merged to form an index (M = 5.96, SD = .87).

Frequency of Political Memes Use. Adapted from the intensity of self-mocking memes use scale (Lu & Fan, 2018), this measurement assessed the intensity of using political memes. Participants were asked how often they have used political memes on Facebook over the past three months (1 = *never* to 7 = *very frequently*), including how

often they have: (a) viewed (*M* = 5.14, *SD* = 1.38); (b) posted (*M* = 2.76, *SD* = 1.88); and (c) created (*M* = 1.79, *SD* = 1.54).

Demographics. Five questions were used to collect demographic information from respondents. These included sex, age, level of education, household income, and race/ethnicity. The majority of respondents were found to be female (57%) and their average age was 38.15 years (*SD* = 11.55). On average, participants reported having completed between a 2-year college degree and 4-year college degree (1 = *less than high school* to 8 = *professional degree*; *M* = 4.22, *SD* = 1.34). The average household income was found to range from $50,000 to under $60,000 (1 = *less than $20,000* to 10 = *$100,000 or more*; *M* = 5.21, *SD* = 2.95). In terms of political ideology, 37.8% of respondents classified themselves as conservatives while 62.2% indicated they were liberals. In regard to the racial/ethnic background of participants, the majority were Caucasian (75.6%), followed by the Asian/Pacific Islander (10.3%), Black/African American (7.7%), Hispanic (4.1%), Native American (1.2%), and 1.1% represented all other groups.

Serving as the dependent variables, these items were constructed to assess varying gratifications obtained from engaging with politically-related memes.

General Gratifications Sought. Intended to measure gratifications from television news viewing (Palmgreen et al., 1980), this scale was adapted for application to political memes. For example, one item read: "I watch television to find out what kind of job our government officials are doing" and was adapted to replace the phrase "watched television" with "political memes." Using data collected with adapted measures, factor analysis with a principal component analysis was conducted to determine the factor structure with varimax (orthogonal) rotation. The analysis extracted two factors, labeled (a) political observation; and (b) political entertainment. Two original statements loaded on both factors with low values and were removed.

Political Observation. This item assesses the use of memes to obtain the gratification of political observation. This measure represents the intentional use of memes to observe and surveil political issues happening. This factor was assessed by asking participants to rate their level of agreement about their use of memes on seven items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Statements include: (a) to keep up with current issues and events; (b) in order to not be surprised by things happen outside; (c)

because I can trust the information memes give me; (d) find out what kind of job government officials are doing; (e) to help me make up my mind about important issues of the day; (f) to find out about issues affecting people like myself; and (g) because the political figures in memes are like people I know. Items were merged to form an index of political observation (α = .93, *M* = 3.18, *SD* = 1.52).

Political Entertainment. This measure assessed the use of political memes to obtain entertainment as a gratification. This factor was assessed by asking participants to rate their level of agreement to six items about their use of memes (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Statements include: (a) because they are often entertaining; (b) because they are often dramatic; (c) because they are often exciting; (d) to support my own viewpoint to other people; (e) to give me interesting things to talk about; and (f) because they give a human quality to political issues. Items were merged to form an index of political entertainment (α = .89; *M* = 4.14, *SD* = 1.42).

Data analysis technique. Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses. Demographics, including age, education, race, income, and sex were entered first. Political attitudes followed, including political self-efficacy, perceptions of political trust, and political interest. The third block included internal and external humor. The final block included political meme use, including viewing, sharing, and creating.

RESULTS

RQ1 asked how political self-efficacy relates to the use of political memes to satisfy needs for both political observation and political entertainment. According to Table 1, individuals with high levels of political self-efficacy were significantly less likely to use politically-related memes for satisfying their need for political observation (*β* = -.07, *p* = .02). However, political self-efficacy was not found to relate to the use of memes for fulfillment of their need for political entertainment (*β* = -.01, *p* = *ns*).

Table 1
*Hierarchical Regression Predicting Using Memes for Political Observation &
Entertainment*

	Use of Memes to Fulfill **Political Observation**	Use of Memes to Fulfill **Political Entertainment**
Demographics		
Age	-.10***	-.07**
Education	.05	-.00
Race (Caucasian higher)	-.12***	-.09**
Sex (Female higher)	-.01	.02
Income	-.05	.02
Political Ideology (Conservative higher)	.02	.02
Incremental R²(%)	11.4%***	3.3%***
Political Attitudes		
Political Self-Efficacy	-.07*	-.01
Political Trust	.10***	.03
Political Interest	.02	.06
Incremental R²(%)	3.6%***	3.8%***
Psychological Attributes		
Internal Humor	.09**	-.04
External Humor	-.03	.17***
Incremental R²(%)	3.7%***	4.0%***
Political Meme Use		
Freq. Viewing Memes	.03	.13***
Freq. Sharing Memes	.37***	.47***
Freq. Creating Memes	.20***	-.01
Incremental R²(%)	22.0%*	24.0%***
Total R²(%)	40.7%	35.1%

Notes. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients.
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

RQ2 investigated the influence of political trust on the use of political memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment. As seen in Table 1, high levels of political trust significantly predicted the use of politically-related memes to satisfy one's need for political observation ($\beta = .10$, $p < .001$), but not political entertainment ($\beta = .03$, $p = ns$).

RQ3 asked how an individual's internal humor relates to the use of political memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment. Individuals with a high level of internal humor were more likely to use memes for political observation ($\beta = .09$, $p = .007$), but not for political entertainment ($\beta = -.04$, $p = ns$; see Table 1).

RQ4 examined the influence of external humor on the use of political memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment. External humor was not related to the use of memes to fulfill a need for political observation ($\beta = -.03$, $p = ns$). On the other hand, as seen in Table 1, individuals with a high level of external humor were significantly more likely to use politically-related memes to satisfy their need for political entertainment ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$).

H1a predicted that individuals who frequently view political memes are more likely to use them to satisfy their need for political entertainment. Data analysis revealed that individuals who frequently view politically-related memes are significantly more likely to use them to satisfy their need for political entertainment ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H1a was supported (see Table 1).

H1b predicted that individuals who frequently view political memes are less likely to use them for satisfying their need for political observation. As seen in Table 1, frequent viewers of political memes were neither significantly likely nor unlikely to use memes for political observation ($\beta = .03$, $p = ns$). Therefore, H1b was not supported.

H2a posited that individuals who frequently share memes referencing politics are more likely to use them to satisfy their need for political entertainment. According to Table 1, individuals who frequently share political memes are significantly more likely to use them to satisfy their needs for both political entertainment ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$). As such, H2b was supported.

H2b claimed that individual who frequently share politically related memes are unlikely to use satisfy their need for political observation. Results showed that those who frequently share political members are likely to use them to satisfy their needs for political observation ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$), demonstrating the opposite of the predicted relationship. As such, H2b was not supported.

H3a predicted that individuals who frequently create political memes will use them to satisfy a need for political observation. Data analysis showed frequent memes creators

are significantly more likely to fulfill their need for political observation ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$). Thus, H3a was supported (see Table 1).

H3b posited that individuals who frequently create politically related memes are unlikely to use them to satisfy their needs for political entertainment. As seen in Table 1, frequent creators of political memes were neither significantly likely nor unlikely to use memes for satisfying their need for political entertainment ($\beta = -.01$, $p = ns$). Therefore, H3b was not supported.

DISCUSSION

Political memes are a popular form of online communication, especially among social media users. Research on the use of memes tends to focus on visual elements, usually through qualitative approaches. Grounded in uses and gratifications theory, this study investigated Facebook users' motivations for engaging with politically-related memes. Overall, results show that users are motivated by different individual-level attributes to fulfill their needs for political observation and political entertainment. Specifically, those with higher levels of political trust, individuals who think they are humorous, and who frequently share and create memes tend to use them for observing politics in action. On the other hand, individuals who prefer to observe humor and those who share and view memes, without engaging in creation, are more likely to use politically-related memes as a form of entertainment. The varying motivations to engage with political memes provides additional support for claims that their use (i.e., view, share/post, create) is a form of political engagement (Börzsei, 2013; Shifman, 2014).

One major goal of this study was to identify and adapt measures used in uses and gratifications studies for application to politically-related memes. Early empirical applications focused on traditional media (e.g., Palmgreen et al., 1980) and recent work has broadened applications to online and mobile media (e.g., Leung & Wei, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). However, the only identifiable attempt to measure gratifications of memes occurred in a Chinese context and examined self-mockery memes (Lu & Fan, 2018). Therefore, the current study adapted existent measures of gratifications sought to focus on the use of political memes.

The adapted measures identified two unique factors, termed political observation and political entertainment, which represent the gratifications obtained from engaging with political memes. Political observation was found to represent the intentional use of memes to fulfill a need to surveil the environment and the actions of political figures while keeping up with news of current social issues. Political entertainment was found to represent the casual use of memes for humor and cynicism, especially as supporting materials for discussing civic issues with others interpersonally.

One major contribution of this study is the examination of how personal characteristics differently predict the use of political memes to satisfy needs. For example, individuals with high levels of political trust were found to use memes to fulfill their need for political observation. On the other hand, those with high levels of political self-efficacy were unlikely to use political memes for the same fulfillment. Identifying those who are politically efficacious as unlikely to use memes to observe politics may indicate that they pay attention to and engage with politics in other ways. This finding aligns with previous research which found that exposure to online political humor was positively related to political self-efficacy and political trust (Becker, 2011).

Memes are essentially humorous pieces of online content that relay messages using text and imagery. Therefore, this study also examined the influence of trait-based types of humor on the use of memes to fulfill gratifications and found varying types of trait-based humor (Cline et al., 2003) differently predict motivations for using political memes. For example, high internal humor, an attribute shared by those who prefer to observe humor rather than create it, was found to predict the use of memes to satisfy one's need for political observation. This finding further validates the conceptualization of political observation, which represents aspects of information seeking and a way of surveillance on political environment. Conversely, high levels of external humor, which is seen among individuals who tend to think they are humorous, was likely to predict the use of memes to fulfill a need for political entertainment. Taken together, these results show that there are nuances among individuals who use politically-related memes.

Findings of this work indicate that users of political memes obtain different gratifications dependent upon how they engage with the content. For instance, the simple act of viewing memes, which requires the least effort, was positively related to using

memes for entertainment. Likewise, sharing memes with one's own network, which requires more effort than viewing alone, had greater influence on satisfying a need for political entertainment. Social media users are said to encounter and share memes on nearly a daily basis (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Therefore, memes are an ideal outlet to fulfill one's need for political entertainment, aligning with claims that individuals gain enjoyment from political memes (Lu & Fan, 2018). Shifman (2014) proposed that memes are intended to be humorous and invite others to participate in sharing opinions on important social/political issues. As a new form of political humor, memes have an effect similar to political satire (Piata, 2016). Satirical television helps viewers recognize political information more easily that they share with non-viewers (Hollander, 2005). Hence, sharing pieces of entertaining online content, originally consumed to satisfy one's need for entertainment, may also help ignite interpersonal communication political discussion.

While it appears that the more effort put into using memes positively relates to obtaining entertainment, the act of meme creation did not result in satisfying one's need for political entertainment. This may be due to the fact that these memes reference serious political/social topics, which intend to communicate complicated information with deeper meaning (Howley, 2016). The creation of memes, which is the activity that demands the most effort, was found to satisfy one's need for political observation. This is a telling result since memes have been claimed to serve as a form of political engagement in our modern media environment (Börzsei, 2013). Therefore, politically-related meme creation appears to offer an opportunity for individuals to share critical perspectives on political leaders and issues, which can satisfy one's need for political observation. Individuals who frequently share memes were also found to satisfy their need for political observation. Using memes in this capacity may assist voters as they judge political leaders and form opinions about candidates. As a visual tool, it has been claimed that social media users think memes help them express feelings better than other ways of sharing their opinions on political topics (Lu & Fan, 2018). The lighthearted nature of memes may also help citizens keep up with different political perspectives as memes flow across cultural, social and political boundaries in online environments (Piata, 2016). Therefore, politicians may now need to

face the reality that political memes are capable of influencing voters' opinions and behaviors (Tenove, 2019).

Overall, this work provides identification and measurement of two types of gratifications obtained from the use of politically-related memes. The attitudes, attributes, and the ways individuals use memes further detail factors that differently predict the use of memes to satisfy needs for political observation and entertainment. Taken together, results show that engagement with politically-related memes may have a substantial impact on how individuals interact with and use political content in a social media environment. These findings facilitate a better understanding of both how and why social media users use political memes, as well as the type of satisfaction users gain. In sum, findings strongly suggest that political memes are a type of political engagement, closely aligned known forms of political entertainment (e.g., satirical political television shows), that individuals strategically engage with to obtain specific gratifications.

Practical implications of this work suggest that meme creators, who demonstrated a propensity for using political memes for political observation, have potential to exert considerable influence on the vast public that views and shares their content. Memes are a rhetorical tool that can provoke emotion and have persuasive abilities, which makes political memes an innovative way for individuals to become engaged in politics. In fact, it has been claimed that "memes are fashioned with particular rhetorical features to charm audiences into replication or in an attempt to induce other specific actions" and they can also quickly and efficiently "disseminate a political agenda" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 7). That is, although political memes are fleeting, they can be effectively used to invite people to care and participate in public affairs (Huntington, 2016; Milner, 2013). In terms of theoretical contributions, this work provides an initial application of uses and gratifications to memes and is among the first to integrate new psychological attributes. Specifically, internal and external humor were considered in this work as predictors of different types of gratifications, including political entertainment and observation. Future work should aim to further investigate how alternative psychological attributes, such as satire and memes, may influence how individual's differently use media content.

Limitations of this work include use of MTurk for participant recruitment, which limits the generalizability of results. In addition, this study relied on self-reported

measures concerning how frequently individuals view, share, and create political memes. Quite simply, what some individuals may consider to be a politically motivated meme may only be seen as a humorous meme without any specific political context by others. Going forward, investigations into the use of political memes should work to further investigate the nuances among different types of uses and across online contexts. Approaching this topic using different types of methodological approaches, such as experiments that include exposure to memes, will provide additional evidence to better understand how political memes are used by everyday social media users.

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