



MAY THE MEMES BE EVER IN YOUR FAVOUR

A Case Study into the Effects of Political Memes on the Position of
Donald Trump During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election



Master thesis

Leiden University
Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs
MSc Crisis and Security Management

Written by: Milenka van Waardhuizen
Student number: s1548018
Thesis supervisor: Dr. T. van Steen
Second reader: S. Wittendorp
Date: 09-06-2019
Word count: 22023 words (including references and tables)

Abstract

This thesis researches how the messages spread by political memes affected Donald Trump's position during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In the first part the research will be situated in the body of knowledge about political memes and political participation, the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the popularization of politics is discussed. The existing body of knowledge does not provide a framework for the analysis of political memes. Therefore, this thesis has created its own framework for political meme analysis. In the second part the requirement for the collection of the memes sample which forms the basis of this research will be set out. Also, the research design and methods of data collection and analysis for the framework of political analysis will be set out. In the third part the collection of the meme sample will be explained, and the coding book will be set out. The coding book will consist of two coding frames, a general coding frame which will analyse the superficial characteristics of the memes, and an in-depth coding frame which will analyse the in-depth details of the memes. In the fourth part the coding frames are applied to the meme sample. In addition, the results of the coding and the analysis of these results will be given. The results suggest that, in relation to the other presidential candidates, the political memes which were spread during the 2016 U.S. presidential election were more positive about Trump. Additionally, Trump was a preferred topic for a significant amount of the political memes during the 2016 election. Therefore, in the final part this thesis argues that the messages spread by political memes during the 2016 election are likely to have strengthened Trump's position in relation to the other presidential candidates.

Table of contents

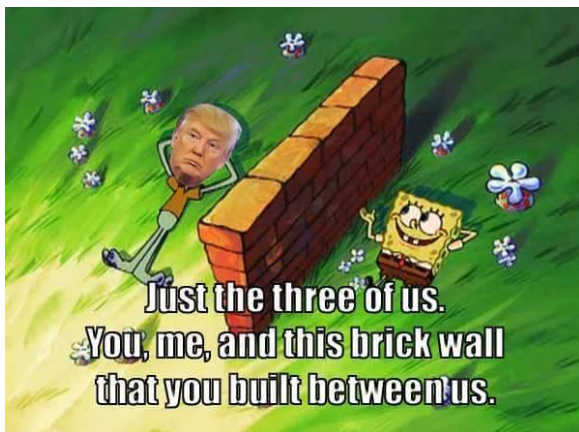
1. Introduction	5
1.1. The effects of political memes on the 2016 U.S. presidential election	5
1.2. Research question	6
1.3. Academic and societal relevance	7
1.4. Thesis outline	7
2. Body of knowledge	9
2.1. Literature review	9
2.1.1. From meme to Internet meme	9
2.1.2. Academic debates in the field of memetics	10
2.1.3. Political memes as a form of political participation	11
2.1.4. Political memes, popular culture, and the popularization of politics	12
2.1.5. The effects of political memes as a form of political participation	14
2.1.6. Choosing between ‘the lesser of two evils’ in a post-truth world	14
2.2. Framework of analysis	15
2.3. Hypotheses	17
3. Method	18
3.1. Research design	18
3.2. Case selection	19
3.2.1. Possible alternative case study	19
3.3. Method of data collection	20
3.3.1. The meme sample	21
3.4. Method of data analysis	22
3.4.1. Qualitative content analysis	22
3.5. Validity and reliability of the research	23
4. Coding book	25
4.1. Collection of the meme sample	25
4.2. Coding book	26
4.2.1. The main coding categories of the general coding frame	27
4.2.2. The main coding categories of the in-depth coding frame	30
4.2.3. General coding frame	34
4.2.4. In-depth coding frame	35
5. Analysis	38
5.1. Results	38

5.1.1. Results of the general coding frame	39
5.1.2. In-text elaboration on the results of the general coding frame	40
5.1.3. Results of the in-depth coding frame	44
5.1.4. In-text elaboration on the results of the in-depth coding frame	45
5.2. Analysis	48
5.2.1. Analysis of the results of the general coding frame	48
5.2.2. Analysis of the results of the in-depth coding frame	51
6. Conclusion	57
6.1. Discussion of the hypotheses	57
6.1.1. Results of the hypotheses testing	61
6.2. Limitations	62
6.3. Avenues for future research	62
6.4. Conclusion	63
7. Bibliography	65

1. Introduction

“So, just to sum up, I would do various things very quickly. I would repeal and replace the big lie, Obamacare. I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I’ll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words. Nobody would be tougher on ISIS than Donald Trump. Nobody.” – Donald Trump

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump announced he was running for president of the United States of America (U.S.) (Time, 2015). Initially, his bid for the presidency was not taken seriously, because Trump was a celebrity and a businessman without political experience. However, to the surprise of many people, Trump managed to win the presidential election of November 2016, and he became the 45th president of the U.S. (Francia, 2017, p.441). Immediately after Trump’s announcement speech, he became the subject of numerous Internet memes which spread rapidly. A lot of these memes were a reaction to the unconventional statements that Trump made during his announcement speech, specifically his promise to build a wall on the border with Mexico (for examples see meme 1 and meme 2).



Meme 1 – Example of Trump Meme



Meme 2 – Example of Trump Meme

These memes make fun of Trump’s plan to build a border wall and question his intelligence. From this point onwards, Trump became an increasingly popular meme subject. Specifically, Trump’s lack of political experience and his status as a celebrity candidate made him a popular subject for meme-makers (Heiskanen, 2017, p.7).

1.1. The effects of political memes on the 2016 U.S. presidential election

Several researchers have tried to make sense of Trump’s election by researching the popularization of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which they argue has changed the political

landscape in the U.S. Moreover, they claim that political memes, as a form of the popularization of politics, provided a form of political participation parallel to mainstream politics. Hence, it is broadly argued that political memes affected the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Heiskanen, 2017; Heikkilä, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2017). However, opinions are divided about what are the main effects of political memes. The three main effects that are ascribed to memes are that they can be used to support, critique or delegitimize the presidential candidates (Heiskanen, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2017). These are all valid effects which are supported by thorough research. Nevertheless, that research remains limited to uncovering the possible effects of political memes. In doing so, the further effects of political memes are left under researched. In addition, the academic field of memetics is young and therefore not much literature is available that researches the effects of political memes. For the same reasons, the literature does not provide a political meme theory or a model of analysis for political memes. Consequently, it has not yet been investigated how the messages spread by political memes have influenced the individual positions of the presidential candidates during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

1.2. Research question

This thesis aims to answer the following research question: “*How did the messages spread by political memes affect Donald Trump’s position during the 2016 U.S. presidential election?*” In order to answer this research question, this thesis will investigate how political memes positioned Trump in the 2016 election. The choice has been made to focus on Trump as the single case study of this thesis because Trump was actually elected as president. Hence, it is interesting to see how political memes could have affected his position during the 2016 election.

In order to research the possible effects of political memes on Trump’s position during the 2016 election, this thesis has created a set of hypotheses. These hypotheses will be researched through the analysis of a political meme sample. This sample will consist of memes that were propagated during the 2016 election. Since the meme literature does not provide a political meme theory or a model of analysis for political memes, this thesis has created its own framework for political meme analysis in the form of a coding book. In doing so, this thesis tries to contribute to the academic field by providing a framework for the analysis of political memes. The aim is that the coding book can be applied to research other case studies.

The coding book consists of two coding frames. The coding frames will be used to draw results from the political memes and to analyse these results. As this thesis focusses on Trump’s position during the 2016 election, the time period which this thesis looks at runs from Trump’s announcement speech on June 16, 2015 till Trump’s election on November 8, 2016.

Importantly, Trump's position during the 2016 election will not be researched as isolated from the positions of the other presidential candidates. On the contrary, these positions can influence each other. Therefore, Trump's position will be researched in relation to the positions of the other presidential candidates.

1.3. Academic and societal relevance

This is a relevant topic to research because political memes are increasingly becoming a form of political participation in the U.S. (Ross & Rivers, 2017, p.1). As such, the effects of this new form of political participation on U.S. politics needs to be researched. This is necessary in order to understand how the popularization of the 2016 election has affected the election. This will provide both important academic insights about the effects of popular culture on politics, and into the social and cultural factors that led to Trump's election. Overall, this thesis will thus help to uncover some of the political, social, and cultural processes and contexts that led to the strengthening of Trump's position in the presidential election. In doing so, this thesis will try to contribute to the untangling of an important academic and social question: how did Trump get elected as president?

Moreover, this is also a relevant topic to research because the U.S. is an international superpower. This entails that all changes in the political leadership of the U.S. will have an impact on international politics. Specifically, when a new U.S. president is elected, this will affect foreign policy decision making and, in turn, international security. Thus, when a seemingly unexperienced U.S. president like Trump is elected, it is both interesting and necessary to research the factors that contributing to the strengthening of his position.

1.4. Thesis outline

After this first introduction chapter, the remainder of this thesis will be divided into five chapters. The second chapter "Body of knowledge" will provide a thorough literature review into the existing literature on political memes and political participation, the 2016 election, and the popularization of politics. In addition, this chapter will present, and elaborate on, the hypotheses of this thesis. The third chapter "Method" will elaborate on the research design, case selection, the methods of data collection and data analysis, and the validity and reliability of the research. The fourth chapter "Coding Book" will explain how the meme sample was collected and discuss the coding book and coding frames. The fifth chapter "Analysis" will discuss the results of the coding frames and will analyse these results. The final chapter "Discussion and conclusion" will discuss and test the hypotheses, stipulate the limitations of

the research, and provide avenues for future research. Finally, the research question will be answered which will conclude the thesis.

2. Body of knowledge

2.1. Literature review

2.1.1. From meme to Internet meme

The ‘meme’ first appeared in Richard Dawkins book “The Selfish Gene”. In this book Dawkins (1976) studies the transmission of human culture (p.203). He argues that human culture is transmitted and spread through memes. He used the term meme to describe small units of cultural transmission that are comparable to genes which propagate themselves from person to person through the process of imitation and/or replication. Examples of memes are, among others, tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, and fashions (Dawkins, 1976, p.206). Moreover, he argues that a meme is always competing with other memes for human attention, and thus only those memes that exploit their cultural environment will be successful (Dawkins, 1976, p.211-214). Dawkins’ meme theory led to the emergence of the field of ‘memetics’, which entails “the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread, and evolution of memes” (Heylighen & Chielens, 2009, p.2). Memetics started to become an active research field in the 1990s, when it increasingly drew scientists from many academic fields (Shifman, 2014, p.10).

Nowadays, the concept of the meme has expanded to also include the ‘Internet meme’. Limor Shifman (2014) describes the Internet meme as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance” which “were created with awareness of each other” and “were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p.41). Internet memes come in several forms. These are memetic phrases, memetic videos, memetic performances, and memetic images. All forms of memes are intertextual, self-aware, and are based on transformation (Milner, 2015, pp.17-18). Moreover, Shifman argues that Internet memes have the ability to capture the main features of the modern participatory digital culture. The three main features of Internet memes are micro-macro propagation, replication through imitation, and selective competition. First, micro-macro propagation entails that memes can be seen as “pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon” (Shifman, 2014, p.18). Hence, memes spread on the micro level, but their impact is felt on the macro level, where they, for example, shape mindsets, behaviours, and actions of different social groups. A fundamental part of this feature is the process of sharing, which refers to activities such as posting Tweets or uploading pictures. Second, replication through imitation entails that memes “reproduce by various means of repackaging or imitation” (Shifman, 2015, p.19). When people imitate

memes, this means that they copy already existing memes completely as they are, without changing anything about the form and/or content. When people repackaging memes, this entails that they transform these memes into their own version of the original meme. Thus, the content and/or form of the meme changes. There are two main repackaging mechanisms. First is mimicry, which is the process of ‘redoing’ already existing memes. This entails the imitation of a specific meme or meme format by other people and/or other means. Second is remixing, which is the process of using technology-based manipulation, for example Photoshop, to re-edit the original memes. Finally, selective competition entails that not all memes, which are diffused through competition and selection, are suitable to adopt to the sociocultural environment in which they are diffused. Thus, successful and popular memes are those that adapt to their sociocultural environment (Shifman, 2015, pp.20-22).

In addition, Shifman (2014) argues that while memes may be created and spread from person to person, they also “shape and reflect general social mindsets” (p.4). Hence, the online processes of creating and spreading memes have become an important part of online participatory culture (Shifman, 2014, p.4). Ryan M. Milner (2015) agrees, stating that social media, or memetic media as he calls them, allow for online memetic participation. Individuals participate in these media by sharing their individual ideas through the creation and spread of memes. Then via memetic media platforms the memes are circulated and transformed, converting these individual ideas into public conversations. Memetic media serve as a common language for online participation, meaning that they allow people from all corners of the world to connect through the same language: memes (Milner, 2015, pp.2-3).

2.1.2. Academic debates in the field of memetics

Despite the enthusiastic use of memes by Internet users in recent years, the academic usefulness of the meme concept has been widely disputed from the start of memetics. There are two main academic debates within memetics. First, memetics sees memes as functioning similar to genes and viruses, meaning that once memes exist, they will inevitably spread like a sneeze. However, some academics argue that this metaphor undervalues the role that people play in the process of the creation and spread of memes. Second, there is debate about the role of human agency in meme diffusion (Shifman, 2014, pp.11-13). Overall, academics are asking questions about “the utility of using memes to explain cultural practices” (Milner, 2015, p.16).

However, as argued by Shifman, the meme concept is useful for the explanation and understanding of cultural trends. She states that “Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural

artefacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends” (Shifman, 2015, p.15). Moreover, she argues that the meme concept embodies the essence of the participatory or Web 2.0 era. The hypermemetic nature of this digital era entails that Internet memes are spread 24/7, and the creators of Internet memes have a central place in this process of meme diffusion (Shifman, 2015, p.30). Milner agrees, arguing that memes matter, because they are exemplary of the social processes and cultural and political contexts underlying them and are therefore useful for understanding these (Milner, 2015, p.40).

Nevertheless, despite the usefulness of the meme concept to study Internet memes, there is an important difference between how the meme is used in the field of memetics and how it is used by Internet users (Shifman, 2015, pp.13-14). As argued by Knobel & Lankshear (2007) Internet memes are a “distinctively contemporary category of memes” (p.200). The field of memetics tends to conceptualize memes biologically, focusing on the effects of memes on human behaviour, equating memes to genes. Contrarily, Internet memes tend to be defined sociologically and culturally, focusing on the role of memes in cultural spaces (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p.201). Knobel & Lankshear define the Internet meme as “the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image language ‘move’, or some other unit of cultural ‘stuff’” (p.202). This use of the term differs substantially from how it is used in the study of memetics. For memetics longevity is an important characteristic of memes, meaning that the longer a meme survives, the more successful it is. For Internet memes, however, longevity is less applicable, because successful Internet memes often exist for short time periods (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p.202). In addition, there is a difference in the object of analysis. In memetics the unit of analysis is rather abstract (Shifman, 2015, p.13), the unit of analysis being described as “pattern”, “structure” or “idea” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p.201). Contrarily, the object of analysis in Internet memes is observable and audio-visual, for example YouTube videos and images (Shifman, 2015, p.13).

2.1.3. Political memes as a form of political participation

Recent research has argued for the importance of the academic study of Internet memes, specifically the study of political memes, in order to understand digital culture, online political participation, and the popularization of politics (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2015; Heiskanen, 2017). Internet memes become political memes when the purpose of the meme is to propagate a political message or to express a political opinion. Political memes have the potential to stimulate participatory activity among the youth in politics. This is an important development, because the youth are often least likely to participate in formal politics (Shifman, 2014, p.120).

Milner adds that the diffusion of memes is an online participation phenomenon in which almost all young people participate (Milner, 2015, p.49). In addition, Yao (2016) found that young people increasingly participate in politics by creating memes which critique the current political environment (p.153). Consequently, political memes can be seen as a form of political participation (Shifman, 2014, p.120). Importantly, however, despite that political memes emerged as a youth culture phenomenon, the people who are involved in the creation and propagation of political memes are not limited to the youth. Instead, political memes have grown into a larger popular culture phenomenon in which large parts of society are involved.

Broadly, political participation can be defined as political action taken by ordinary individuals to achieve political ends and/or influence, and sometimes change, political outcomes (Peters, 2018, p.22). In recent years, the concept of political participation has been broadened to include more than political practices which are easily measured (Shifman, 2014, p.120). Examples of such conventional and formal forms of political participation are voting and membership of a political organisation (Lister & Pia, 2008, pp.85-90). Lister & Pia (2008) argue that informal political participation, like political activism, has seen an increase. In addition, political inaction is also part of the concept of political participation (Lister & Pia, 2008, pp.91-92). Shifman defines this informal political participation to include “mundane practices, such as commenting on political blogs and posting jokes about politicians” (Shifman, 2014, p.120). According to Shifman, this change in the concept of political participation, is largely a result of the Internet and social media. In addition, Milner argues that “political participation is not always a simple binary”, but “there are degrees of engagement with political events and popular culture” (Milner, 2015, p.182). Hence, the concept of political participation has expanded to include also online political participation. Consequently, the process of the creation and propagation of political memes, which is aimed at influencing political outcomes, can also be considered as political participation.

2.1.4. Political memes, popular culture, and the popularization of politics

Linked to the broadening of the concept of political participation is the popularization of politics. As explained by Milner, “memes are inherently intertwined with the popular” (Milner, 2015, p.156). The memes that are the most successful are those are the most popular, meaning that many people resonate with them. In addition, memes often reappropriate popular culture, like popular films, songs, and TV shows (Milner, 2015, p.156). Therefore, online memetic participation allows for polyvocal participation, meaning that the more people make use of participatory social media, the more different individual perspectives are involved in political

expression and discussion. These different individual perspectives together form a powerful collective civic voice, and this stimulates public conversation (Milner, 2015, p.155). In this political conversation people can communicate about political issues that they find important through popular culture (Milner, 2015, p.156). Hamilton (2016) agrees with Milner, arguing that it is useful to study world politics through the lens of (digital) popular culture, because it allows one to research the actual lived political experiences of people (p.4). Furthermore, Yao's (2016) research proved that "memes are representative of significant popular cultural moments" (p.153). She further argued that the memes which are created and diffused by individuals online often carry critiques about the current political environment (Yao, 2016, p.153). Thus, the above entails that people can politically express themselves through the creation and propagation of political memes.

Specifically, popular culture and media in general, and political memes specifically, have played an important role in U.S. presidential elections. This has been studied by several academics. Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla & Williams (2010) argued that during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the use of Internet and social media for political communication increased significantly (p. 670). Six years later, Yao (2016) argued that the 2012 U.S. presidential election can be called the first 'Meme Election', because of the phenomenon of campaign memes which was a mechanism to start conversations about the presidential candidates (p.158). In 2017, Heiskanen & Butters researched the popularization of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, arguing that this was an election of change and populist resurgence. Moreover, they argue that during the 2016 election, the political and popular culture spheres in the U.S. became increasingly interlinked (Heiskanen & Butters, 2017, pp.2-3).

The role of memes in the 2016 election is further researched by Heiskanen (2017). She argues that the power of political memes lies in their ability to call attention to contradictory statements by the presidential candidates and to critique their policy positions. In doing so, political memes facilitate individual agency in politics (Heiskanen & Butters, 2017, p.7). Moreover, Heiskanen argues that Internet memes were spread on social media as a form of electoral participation. Furthermore, she claims that meme-ing, which she sees as the spread of memes via social media, stimulated participatory activity in electoral politics of a group of voters that were not likely to become engaged (Heiskanen, 2017, p.4). Finally, she notices that memes allow for political participation outside of the official political discourses by enabling Internet users to quickly respond to political events in real time and by providing parallels to mainstream politics. In addition, political memes are often made by young people who are usually not involved in politics (Heiskanen, 2017, p.20).

2.1.5. The effects of political memes as a form of political participation

Political memes are increasingly stimulating online political participation. Online political participation emerged parallel to offline electoral participation (Heiskanen, 2017, p.4). Specifically, online political participation in the form of political memes, allowed Trump to “mobilize a vast base of previously inactive voters from diverse backgrounds” which “steered the course of the election year and the rhetoric involved” (Heiskanen, 2017, p.5). For example, an important group of inactive voters which were mobilized by Trump’s election campaign is the youth. The youth, from ages 18 till 29, are an important voter group, because they make up around 20% of the population in the U.S. eligible for voting. This means that as a group, the youth in the U.S. can seriously influence political outcomes (The Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement). In addition, though the Trump campaign never openly accepted the support, parts of the extreme right or alt-right movements were also mobilized by Trump’s campaign (Barkun, 2017, p.440).

Hence, political memes could be used by these voters to support the presidential candidates (Heiskanen, 2017, p.19). At the same time, political memes were used during the 2016 election to critique or delegitimize the presidential candidates. Delegitimization means undermining the candidates by deriding, ridiculing, and mocking them (Ross & Rivers, 2017, pp.1-2). Ross & Rivers (2017) give several examples of how different discourses of delegitimization were successfully used in political memes during the 2016 election. They were used to delegitimize the presidential candidates in order to influence political outcomes. For example, they discuss the discourse of delegitimization through authorization. Memes which use this discourse are used to undermine the authority of the candidates. They give the example of political memes that created the image that Trump did not express the authority which could be expected from a presidential candidate. Instead, they created the image that Trump only used the presidential candidacy to provide a stage for his narcissism. In doing so, these memes undermined Trump’s authority as a presidential candidate. Another example they give is the discourse of delegitimization through moral evaluation. Here the memes take the example of Trump’s border wall as their subject and compare this wall to the Berlin Wall. As a result of the negative connotations associated with the Berlin Wall, Trump’s border wall plan is delegitimized (Ross & Rivers, 2017, pp.5-7).

2.1.6. Choosing between ‘the lesser of two evils’ in a post-truth world

Using memes to delegitimize the presidential candidates makes sense, considering that many U.S. citizens felt that, as a result of the many scandals and problems surrounding both

candidates, the 2016 presidential election was a choice between “the lesser of two evils” (Heiskanen, 2017, p.18). On top of this, the 2016 election coincided with the so-called “post-truth world”. Ball argues that it emerged in 2016 as a consequence of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom (UK) and the U.S. presidential election. Moreover, it was a result of the breakdown in trust in conventional media, the widespread belief that the two elections had unavoidable conclusions, and the use of what he calls ‘bullshit’. Ball argues that ‘bullshit’ is the fake news that is nowadays widely spread online. During the 2016 election, mainstream media became flooded by false and untrue claims and stories. The political campaigns were left to explain to the public which stories were false and which were not. This led to the wide spread of false claims about the presidential candidates (Ball, 2017, pp.2-4). Clearly, the spread of fake news about the presidential candidates had the ability to further undermine them.

2.2. Framework of analysis

In the above discussed research, it was generally concluded that online political participation and political memes proliferated in the 2016 election. Researchers have used meme research in order to argue that the creation, and propagation of political memes constitutes a form of political participation. In addition, they argued that political memes can be used to support, critique and/or delegitimize the presidential candidates (Heiskanen, 2017; Heiskanen & Butters, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2017). However, their research remains limited to uncovering the direct effects of political memes. Consequently, the further cultural, political, and social effects of political memes are left under researched. As explained in the literature review, political memes propagate a political message and opinion and have the potential to influence political outcomes. These different opinions which are spread by political memes are used to position the presidential candidates in a certain way. Whether they are used to support, critique or delegitimize the candidate. These opinions can be positive, negative or neutral and, in turn, the positioning of the candidates can be positive, negative or neutral. It is interesting to research how these different political messages, which are spread by political memes, have influenced the individual positions of the presidential candidates during the 2016 election.

Specifically, it is note-worthy to focus on the effects of political memes on the position of Donald Trump, because Trump was the topic of countless positive, negative, and neutral political memes. Immediately after Trump announced he was running for the presidency, numerous political memes appeared which uttered opinions about Trump as a political candidate. As the 2016 election period continued, the number of memes about Trump kept increasing. Many viewed Trump as an untrustworthy and unqualified presidential candidate

because he changed his mind on several important issues and he had no political experience (Heiskanen, 2017, pp.6-7). Consequently, Trump's election as president surprised many people. Researching how political memes affected his position in the 2016 election can help to uncover some of the cultural, political, and social factors that strengthened his position enough in order for him to win the presidential election. This will help to make more sense of Trump's election.

Of course, political memes are not the only factor that contributed to the strengthening of Trump's position during the 2016 election. Other factors have also influenced Trump's position. For example, Trump's election campaign successfully connected to voters via social media. In addition, Trump was very active on Twitter (Heiskanen, 2017, pp.1-2). Moreover, the alt-right movements decided to support Trump already early in his campaign (Heikkilä, 2017, p.3). These developments, and many others, also influenced Trump's position during the 2016 election. Nevertheless, this thesis has decided to focus on the effects of political memes.

Importantly, despite that this thesis will focus on Trump's position, this does not mean that Trump's position will be researched as isolated from the positions of the other candidates. On the contrary, this thesis will also investigate whether political memes about the other candidates have influenced Trump's position. It is possible that negative memes about Clinton helped to strengthen Trump's position. However, a negative meme about Clinton does not necessarily mean that it is positive about Trump. In fact, memes might just as well be negative about both Clinton and Trump. In order to research this, this thesis will collect a meme sample consisting of political memes which were shared from Trump's announcement speech on June 16, 2015 till Trump's election on November 8, 2016. Thus, also memes that do not show or discuss Trump will be included because they can have also had an effect on Trump's position.

This thesis will base its research on the already discussed literature and research into Internet memes, political memes, and the popularization of politics during the 2016 election. As discussed in the literature review the meme is defined and used differently by the memetics field and by Internet users. As this thesis is interested in Internet memes and popular culture it makes more sense to focus on Internet users and Internet memes. Memetics has been important for the development of memes and the meme concept is a useful concept to study the modern Internet memes. However, as a result of the difference between the field of memetics and the popular use of the meme by Internet users, memetics does not provide a framework for analysis into political memes. Therefore, this thesis has created its own framework of analysis on the basis of the existing literature and the meme sample, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

2.3. Hypotheses

This these will research the following main hypothesis.

H1: *The creation and propagation of the messages of political memes affected Donald Trump's position during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.*

Before the main hypothesis can be properly researched, this thesis will first need to research the several concepts and ideas which form the foundation of the main hypothesis. These have been formulated into several sub-hypotheses.

H2: *Political memes stimulated political participation in the U.S.*

H3: *The majority of the political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election featured Trump.*

H4: *The purpose of political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election was to support the preferred candidate.*

H5: *The purpose of political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election was to delegitimize the opponent candidate.*

H6: *The political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election lowered the threshold to participate in politics.*

The meme analysis of the meme sample of political memes from the 2016 election on the basis of the coding book will be used to research the hypotheses. The hypotheses will be tested in the final chapter in the discussion.

3. Method

This chapter will first elaborate on the chosen research design and the case selection of this thesis. Hereafter, it will discuss the method of data collection and the method of data analysis. Finally, the validity and reliability of the research will be shortly discussed.

3.1. Research design

The conceptual model of this thesis is depicted in figure 1. The dependent variable is the position of Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The independent variable is the messages spread by political memes. The concept political meme has already been defined in the body of knowledge chapter.

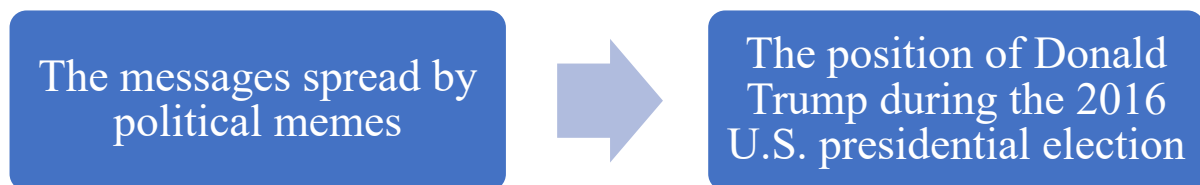


Figure 1 – Research design

A case study design was chosen, because a case study is, as argued by Yin (1994) the preferred research strategy to answer how and why questions. Similar to the how question proposed in this thesis. Moreover, a case study is favoured when examining contemporary events over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 1994, pp.8-9). The case study of the position of Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election presents such a contemporary event. Furthermore, the strategy of this research is exploratory and aimed at uncovering the effects of political memes on the position of Trump during the 2016 election. For such research case studies are useful (Gerring, 2004, p.352). The research is thus inductive, meaning that it explores a rather new phenomenon.

This qualitative research design has been chosen because qualitative research is useful to do the kind of within-case analysis that has been described above (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012, chap.3). In addition, qualitative research allows one to focus on the specific effects and processes that generate outcome. Thus, this thesis can research, and draw conclusions from, the effects of political memes on the position of Donald Trump during the 2016 election

3.2. Case selection

The case that has been chosen is the position of Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. First of all, this case has been selected because it is a deviant case. A deviant case “demonstrates a surprising value” (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p.302). It is in general inadequately explained by existing literature and it is hard to compare it to other cases. Moreover, it is an exploratory form of analysis and its purpose is to investigate and propose new explanations for the surprising value (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p.302). Indeed, the apparently strong position of Trump, which eventually led to him winning the 2016 election, constitutes a surprising value, because most researchers did not expect this outcome. The case study is therefore exploratory in nature. It is used to investigate a possible explanation for the strong position of Trump during the 2016 election. Namely, the rise of political memes as a way to spread political messages and to influence political outcomes.

Moreover, the case has been selected because it will not only contribute to the academic research on the popularization of U.S. politics, and specifically the research into the effect of political memes, but it will also provide some necessary meaning-making in general. The 2016 election left many people questioning how Trump was chosen to become the president of the U.S. Hence, in order to make sense of the current political landscape in the U.S. and to better respond to these political developments, this case needs to be researched. It will provide both important academic insights about the effects of popular culture on politics, and into the political, social and cultural factors and contexts that strengthened Trump’s position during the 2016 election.

3.2.1. Possible alternative case study

Furthermore, it is important to discuss another important political meme event that could have been a case study for this thesis: the 2016 UK Brexit referendum. This referendum can also be regarded as an example of the popularization of politics in which political memes played a role. Nevertheless, this thesis has decided to take the 2016 U.S. presidential election as its single case study. This decision was taken based on three factors. First, the U.S. is a superpower on the stage of world politics. This entails that any significant changes in the political culture and political leadership of the U.S. will have a larger impact on world politics than the same changes in the UK. Trump can decide on matters like the future relationship with Russia and NATO. These kinds of decisions are more impactful than consequences of the Brexit (Ball, 2017, p.4). Second, is the scope of the case. The scope of a U.S. presidential election is larger than the scope of a UK referendum because the U.S. has more citizens than the UK. As a result,

the amount of people that participate in the propagation of political memes is much larger in the U.S. than in the UK. Third, the role that memes played in the cases was taken into consideration. While memes played a role in the Brexit vote, this role was likely not as significant as in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Guardian even spoke of a ‘meme warfare’ during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, claiming that political memes had seriously affected the election (Haddow, 2016). This shows that the 2016 U.S. election is a unique example of a meme election, which makes it the most appropriate case for the research of this thesis. In addition, this thesis chose a single case study instead of a comparative case study approach because the two cases are too different. Therefore, they would not have been suitable cases for a comparative case study research.

Ultimately, the choice for a single case study research has an important consequence. A single case study research carries less authoritative weight than a multiple case study research, because it only studies one case and can thus not say anything about similar cases. However, a single case study research offers the opportunity to do a more in-depth case study than a comparative case study research (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012, chap.7). In addition, a single case study research is still able to generalize conclusions based on the single case, which can be broadly applicable to other similar cases in the future (Yin, 1994, p.10).

3.3. Method of data collection

The basis of this research will be formed by a thorough literature review of the existing literature on political memes and political participation, the 2016 election, and the popularization of politics. In addition, this thesis will collect primary data. A varied and extensive sample of political memes about the 2016 election will be acquired. The sample will solely focus on memetic images because memetic images were the most common type of political meme that was propagated during the 2016 election. Moreover, it would be impossible to compare all different types of memes in one analysis because they are not suitable for such direct comparison. The meme sample will be obtained from two main political meme websites: knowyourmeme.com and me.me. These websites were chosen because they provide easy to navigate meme databases. This entails that on both websites it is possible to systematically search for memes by using a certain time period and/or topic. Accordingly, both websites allow for the systematic search of political memes from the 2016 election. In addition, both websites have a vast collection of political memes from the 2016 election. Specifically, knowyourmeme.com was chosen because this website is considered to be the main guide to go for Internet memes (Milner, 2015, p.45). Moreover, knowyourmeme.com was used as a source

in several previous studies (Shifman, 2015; Milner, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017). No previous studies were found which used me.me as a source. However, this source was chosen because when searching for political meme databases, this website frequently popped up.

3.3.1. The meme sample

The meme sample will be a purposive sample, meaning that the sample will consist of political memes which have been deliberately sought and which meet the study criteria (Morse, 2011, p.885). In order to collect a valid and reliable sample of political memes, it is important to look at the main concept of the independent variable which will be researched. The concept of political memes has several indicators which are essential to clarify and bring into the research. There are four indicators which will be used to investigate the political memes and to determine whether a meme indeed had the potential to have influence on political outcomes and be a vehicle of political participation during the 2016 election. Together these indicators will form the framework for the political meme collection. The first indicator is political. This entails that the memes need to propagate a political message and/or a political opinion. The second indicator is success. This requires that memes need to, as explained in the body of knowledge chapter, meet the main features of Internet memes: micro-macro propagation, replication through imitation, and selective competition. Put more simply, this entails that memes need to be shared, repackaged, and successfully adapted to their sociocultural environment. The third indicator is popularity. This entails that memes needed to be shared on social media and/or needed to generate substantial attention. Popularity is important, because it is likely that the more popular a meme was, the more influence it could have had on Trump's position. A useful tool to help measure popularity is to look at the amount of likes and/or shares that a meme has generated. The final indicator is time period. The memes need to have been created and propagated during the selected time period between June 16, 2015 and November 8, 2016.

Following the indicators as set out in the previous paragraph, the study criteria have been specified. In order to be selected for the meme sample the memes need to possess a couple of features. First, the memes need to be memetic images, meaning that the memes need to be in image format. Second, the memes need to be political, that is contain a political message. Third, the memes need to be successful, meaning they were shared, repackaged, and adapted to their sociocultural environment. Fourth, the memes need to have generated some degree of popularity, meaning that they were shared via social media or uploaded to a meme database. Finally, the memes need to be election memes, meaning that they were created and spread during the following 2016 election.

3.4. Method of data analysis

The collected data will be analysed using content analysis. According to Babbie (2013) content analysis is “the study of recorded human communications” (p.295). Abbott and McKinney (2013) extend the study of content analysis to include anything that people have created. Hence, political memes, which have been created by people, can be studied using content analysis. The analysis of political memes will be used to research the creation and propagation of political memes during the 2016 election. Moreover, this analysis will reveal the goal of these political memes and it will uncover the influence that they could have had on Trump’s position in the election. Thus, the analysis will be used to test the main hypothesis and the five sub-hypotheses, and to answer the main research question.

In general, content analysis has been chosen because it allows for the “systemic reduction and interpretation” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2018) of human communications. Additionally, content analysis allows to research “what is happening in the world in order to compare what is happening in public perceptions” (Abbott & McKinney, 2013, p.317). The aim of this thesis is to research political memes in order to find out whether what was happening in the political reality of the U.S. is comparable to how the U.S. public perceived it to be. The political memes will be analysed in order to establish what the public perceptions about U.S. politics were and how these could have influenced the position of Trump.

3.4.1. Qualitative content analysis

Specifically, the method used to conduct the meme analysis will be qualitative content analysis. This is a method to systematically describe the meaning of data by “assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame” (Schreier, 2013, p.170). The coding frame holds all facets of the description and interpretation of the data. It is characterized by three features. First, qualitative content analysis reduces the amount of data by requiring researchers to focus on those aspects of meaning that relate back to the main research question. This results in a coding frame with a number of categories and subcategories. Second, qualitative content analysis is systematic. It requires the study of all parts of the data and it requires a certain sequence of steps. Finally, qualitative content analysis is flexible, because the coding frame always needs to be matched to the data, meaning that some of the categories of the coding frame need to be data-driven (Schreier, 2013, pp.170-171).

The coding frame consists of main categories and subcategories. Main categories are defined as “those aspects of the material about which the researcher would like more information” and subcategories “specify what is said in the material with respect to these main

categories’’ (Schreier, 2013, p.175). Importantly, a coding frame needs to meet some requirements. First, is the requirement of unidimensionality. This entails that a main category can only address one aspect of the data used. Second, is the requirement of mutual exclusiveness. This entails that the subcategories of each main category should be mutually exclusive, meaning that only one of the subcategories can apply to each piece of data. Third, is the requirement of exhaustiveness. This entails that all relevant aspects of the material must be addressed by a main category (Schreier, 2013, pp.175-176).

The first step in building the coding frame is the selection of data. The selected data needs to be as diverse as possible, so that it will cover all relevant aspects of the material (Schreier, 2013, p.176). The goal is to collect memes that covers as many relevant people, moments, and events from during the 2016 election as possible. The next step in building the coding frame is to create the main categories and subcategories. Both the main categories and the subcategories were created in a combination of a concept-driven approach and a data-driven approach, meaning that they were created both on the basis of the literature review and of the collected data. Then, the following step in building the coding frame is to define the categories. First, each main category and subcategory should be named. These category names should clearly and concisely describe what a category refers to. Second, a description should be given of each category. In this definition a description needs to be given which states the meaning of the category and what features are characteristic for this category. Indicators can be used to point out the presence of a phenomenon in the data. Indicators can be words, descriptions or questions which point out the presence of a phenomenon. Overall, it is important to conduct a small trial coding once the coding frame has been completed, and to revise and expand the coding frame where necessary. After the trial coding the main coding will be executed. The findings from the main coding will be presented both in a table in percentages and an in-text explanation about the table (Schreier, 2013, pp.177-184).

3.5. Validity and reliability of the research

In order to make this research as valid and reliable as possible, this thesis has taken several precautions. First, by highlighting the indicators of the independent variable in the criteria for the selection of the meme sample, the political meme sample will be as reflective as possible of the political memes that were shared during the 2016 election. Moreover, by using qualitative content analysis to create a coding book for the analysis of the political memes, the political memes can be systematically coded and analysed. This enhances the validity and reliability of the research.

However, despite that the meme sample will be as reflective as possible of the memes that were spread during the 2016 election, some degree of selection bias might still occur. Therefore, it is necessary to mention that this thesis does not wish to draw absolute conclusions about all of the memes which were propagated during the 2016 election. Rather, on the basis of the meme sample, this thesis can draw conclusions about the potential of the political memes to influence Trump's position.

Finally, since this research uses a single-case study, it has also taken precautions to be able to generalize its results towards other circumstances and people. This thesis will use qualitative content analysis to create a systematic and data-driven coding book as a framework for political meme analysis. This coding book can be applied to other relevant cases in different countries where there are different circumstances and actors involved. In this way, this thesis will be to generalize results towards other circumstances and people.

4. Coding book

This chapter will first discuss how the memes sample was collection. Then, it will discuss the coding book. Both coding frames will be discussed. First the definitions of the main categories of the two coding frames will be given. Hereafter, both coding frames will be presented. For each coding category explanations will be given about how the memes were coded for that category.

4.1. Collection of the meme sample

Using the study criteria as set out in the Method of Data Collection section of the previous chapter, the meme sample was collected. Considering the importance of the time period for the selection, the choice was made to collect the memes chronologically. In order to make a chronological search feasible, the time period was divided in two main time periods. The first time period runs from June 16, 2015 to June 2016. This time period encompasses the period from Trump's announcement speech till the end of the Republican primaries. The main focus here is on Trump's position in the campaign for the Republican presidential candidacy. Thus, it focuses not just on Trump, but also on the other Republican presidential candidates. The first time period will be referred to as the announcement and primaries period. The second time period runs from July 2016 to Trump's election on November 8, 2016. This time period encompasses the period in which the general presidential election took place. The main focus here is on Trump's position in the general election. Thus, it focuses on both Trump and Clinton. The second time period will be referred to as the general election period. The choice for these two specific time periods was made because these periods discuss two very different, but equally important, positions of Trump in the 2016 election. Treating the two positions as the same would therefore not be correct.

The choice was made to focus not just on Trump in the meme sample, but also on other relevant presidential candidates in both time periods. It would be a mistake to treat the memes about Trump as an isolated phenomenon, because they were not. Trump was not the only candidate about who memes were being made during the 2016 election. Therefore, in order to collect a meme sample that best reflects the memes that were shared during the 2016 election, and therefore can be used to research the effect of memes on Trump's position, the other presidential candidates needed to be included into the sample as well.

After setting out the two time periods and their boundaries, knowyourmeme.com was used to determine the most important and/or memorable memes and events during both time

periods. For the announcement and primaries period the pages about the 2016 presidential primaries were used (Know Your Meme, 2015). For the general election period the page about the 2016 U.S. presidential election was used (Know Your Meme, 2016). Working with this basis, memes were added on basis of their added value by using both knowyourmeme.com and me.me. The added memes needed to cover events and ‘memeable’ moments which were different from those already included in the sample. The definition for memeable in this thesis is the same definition that is used in popular culture. Memeable is defined as people, moments, and events which can be made into memes (Urban Dictionary, 2012). For example, a funny picture of a person can be memeable. The memes were added chronologically on the basis of their publication date. This process continued until a point of saturation was reached where the meme sample covered all relevant events and candidates from both time periods.

For both time periods different events and candidates were important to include in order to reach the point of saturation. Specifically, for the announcement and primaries period, not all relevant and important republican candidates were included in the memes that the basis generated. Therefore, it was necessary to individually search for these candidates. These searches did not only generate memes about the specific candidate, but also about other important events in this time period. Using this method, the point of saturation for the announcement and primaries period was eventually reached. It is important to mention that not all seventeen Republican presidential candidates were included in the sample. The five Republican candidates that withdrew before the start of the Republican primaries were not included because they were not in the race long enough in order to generate popular memes and/or influence Trump’s position (Know Your Meme, 2015). For the general election period, the sections about the 2016 election on the pages about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton on knowyourmeme.com were used to add more memes to the basis (Know Your Meme, 2013; Know Your Meme, 2014) and specific searches were conducted on me.me. Using this method, the point of saturation for the general election period was reached. The meme sample consists of a total of 138 memes.

4.2. Coding book

Based on the qualitative content analysis method as explained in the Method of Data Analysis section of the previous chapter, the coding book was created. The choice has been made to conduct a two-tier coding analysis, meaning that the coding book will consist of two coding frames. The first coding frame will be used to analyse all memes in the meme sample. It will be referred to as the general coding frame. The general coding frame will look at the more

superficial aspects of the memes, like their source and genre. The second coding frame will be used to analyse a randomly selected sample of 40 memes of the meme sample, 20 from each time period. The choice for a random sample was made to prevent researcher bias as much as possible. It will be referred to as the in-depth coding frame. It will be a more thorough analysis that looks into the details of the memes, like their message and goal. Because it is more in-depth the used meme sample is smaller. Taken together, the more superficial and the in-depth results from the two coding frames can be used to test the hypotheses and to answer the main question.

The coding categories that will be set out in this coding book can be divided into four coding themes. These are statistics coding, form coding, content coding, and in-depth content coding. Statistics coding refers to the coding categories which are used to look into the data which specify the characteristics of the memes. Form coding refers to the coding categories which are used to look into the form of the memes. Content coding refers to the coding categories which are used to look into the apparent content of the memes, meaning the content that can be found in the text and image of the meme. Finally, in-depth content coding refers to the coding categories which are used to look into the in-depth details of the memes. Rather than focusing on the apparent content of the meme like the content coding categories, the in-depth content coding categories look into the in-depth content that can be found in the details of the meme. On the basis of these four coding themes, the two coding frames were created.

4.2.1. The main coding categories of the general coding frame

The general coding frame will consist of seven main coding categories. These are meme source, time period, meme category, meme genre, visibility, sentiment, and popular culture. This coding frame is used to analyse the statistics coding, form coding, and content coding categories. The statistic coding categories are meme source and time period. The form coding categories are meme category and meme genre. And the content coding categories are visibility, sentiment, and popular culture.

Statistics coding

I – Meme source

The first coding category is meme source. It is used to determine the source of the meme. This is a relevant category because it will help to provide an insight into where these political memes were being shared during the 2016 election. This will give an idea about which social media platforms were most influential in the spread of memes during this period.

II – Time period

The second coding category is time period. It is used to determine the time period in which the meme was shared. It is important to know whether a meme was shared in the announcement and primaries period or the general election period. Because the two time periods emphasize to different positions of Trump in the 2016 election, namely his position in the Republican primaries and his position in the general election. In each time period, different events and people can influence Trump's position.

Form coding

III – Meme category

The third coding category is meme category. This category is used to determine the meme category to which a meme belongs, meaning how the meme was created. There are two main meme categories: copying and repackaging. Copying entails that memes are being shared as they are, without any changes being made to the form and content. Repackaging entails that Internet users create their own memes by changing the form and content of already existing memes. The two main repackaging mechanisms for memes are mimicry and remixing. Mimicry entails the imitation of a specific meme or meme format by other people and/or other means. This can also entail re-using a certain image and/or text, meme format, or meme template that has already been used in previous memes. Remixing is the process of using technology-based manipulation like Photoshop to re-edit other memes, meme formats or memeable images (Shifman, 2014, pp.19-22). Thus, the difference between mimicry and remixing is that remixing changes already existing memes and meme formats, while mimicry merely imitates or re-uses already existing memes and meme formats.

IV – Meme genre

The fourth coding category is meme genre. It is used to determine the meme genre to which a meme belongs. Orlikowski and Yates (1994) have defined genres as “socially recognized types of communicative actions” which are “enacted by members of a community” (p.542). Additionally, Shifman (2014) argues that “genres share not only structures and stylistic features, but also themes, topics, and intended audiences” (p.60). Indeed, Internet memes also follow genres, meaning that Internet users tend to use the same genres in meme creation. These Internet meme genres allow for the creation of creative practices through simple means of production (Shifman, 2014, p.60). Hence, Internet meme genres provide for collective

resonance, meaning that large groups of people can understand memes because they can resonate with their form and/or content (Milner, 2015, pp.29-33).

There is a wide array of meme genres and new meme genres are added throughout the years. However, for the purpose of the time period that this thesis studies, the following selection of meme genres has been chosen: image macros, panel comparison memes, captioned memes, template memes, Photoshopped memes, and reaction memes. Most of these genres have been named by the writer of this thesis on the basis of the memes that were collected in the sample. Image macros are memes that are captioned images which consist of a picture that has a top caption and bottom caption. These memes are typically quickly created with the use of a meme generator (Know Your Meme, 2012). Panel comparison memes are memes that consist of two or more panels and/or pictures that are divided by one or more lines. The panels are used as a comparison between people or things. Captioned memes are memes that consist of a picture or photo which is placed in a white square. Above the picture in the white square there is text. These memes can easily be made using a meme generator or meme app. Template memes are memes that consist of a standard meme template. The meme template can be edited to create a new meme. Usually meme generators or apps are used to create these memes. Photoshopped memes are memes that were created with the use of photo manipulation programmes. Reaction memes are memes that consist of a picture or photo that is used to show a reaction to an event, incidence, or person.

Content coding

V – Visibility

The fifth coding category is visibility. This category is used to determine the visibility of the main presidential candidates Trump and Clinton in the memes. This is relevant because it provides an insight into how memeable the main candidates were. And whether memes had the potential to influence their individual positions. Visibility then is defined as being visible in the picture/photo of the meme and/or being mentioned in the text of the meme.

VI – Sentiment

The sixth coding category is sentiment. Sentiment is defined by the Merriam-Webster's online dictionary as "a specific view or notion" that is "prompted by feeling" (Sentiment, n.d.). The sentiment of a meme can be positive, negative or neutral. This category is used to determine the sentiment about the main presidential candidates Trump and Clinton in the memes. The choice was made to define sentiment in terms of negative, positive, and neutral instead of in

terms of pro-Trump and anti-Clinton. This choice was made because pro-Trump does not always equal negative about Clinton and anti-Clinton does not always equal positive about Trump.

VII – Popular culture

Finally, the seventh coding category is popular culture. It is used to determine whether a reference to popular culture is made in a meme. This is relevant to analyse because memes often make a popular culture reference in order to resonate with a larger audience. Popular culture references mainly refer to films, music, and TV shows (Milner, 2015, p.156).

4.2.2. The main coding categories of the in-depth coding frame

The in-depth coding frame will consist of seven main categories. These are popularity, message, goal, party affiliation, humour, fake news, and meme complexity. This coding frame is used to analyse the in-depth content coding categories. In order to do so, one statistics coding category, namely popularity, is also included in this coding frame. Popularity was added to the in-depth coding frame instead of the general coding frame in order to be able to research the link of meme popularity to the in-depth effects of the memes on the 2016 presidential candidates. The in-depth content categories are message, goal, party affiliation, humour, fake news, and meme complexity.

In-depth statistics coding

I – Popularity

The first coding category is popularity. This category is used to determine whether a meme was popular or not. Popularity is important because it is likely that the more popular a meme was, the more influence it could have had on the positions of the presidential candidates. Popularity is measured in the amount of likes and/or views that a meme has generated. Because it is difficult to determine how many likes and/or views define a popular meme in general, a scale of popularity has been constructed using all the memes in the meme sample. For all memes the amount of likes and/or views that generated was noted down. After this, all these numbers of likes and/or views per meme have been put on a scale. Based on the highest and the lowest number of likes and/or views the popularity scale was divided in five scales: 1 – not so popular, 2 – somewhat popular, 3 – popular, 4 – very popular, and 5 – extremely popular. For the definitions of the scales see table 1.1.

Popularity scale	Definition	Amount of likes and/or views
1	Not so popular	1 – 250
2	Somewhat popular	251 – 1000
3	Popular	1001 – 5000
4	Very popular	5001 – 10.000
5	Extremely popular	10.001 or more

Table 1 – Popularity scale

Important to mention is that the amount of likes and/or views are acquired from knowyourmeme.com and me.me. Knowyourmeme.com works with a cumulative number of so-called ‘views’, meaning that the website records the amount of views that a certain meme has had from the day that it was uploaded on knowyourmeme.com till today. Me.me shows the number of likes that a meme had at the website on which it was originally uploaded at the moment that it was found and uploaded onto me.me. Thus, the websites use a different tactic of calculating views and likes. However, the decision has been made to put this data from both websites into one scale. The goal of this popularity scale is to provide some idea in general about the popularity of political memes during the 2016 election, meaning that it is not important to know the exact individual popularity of one meme over another.

In-depth content coding

II – Message

The second coding category is message. It is used to uncover the political message that a meme aimed to spread. These messages can be negative, positive or neutral. This category goes further than the sentiment category of the general coding frame. It does not merely focus on the sentiment about the main presidential candidates that is expressed in the memes, but it also focuses on the message behind this sentiment. In doing so, this category will help uncover whether the messages in the memes could be used to influence the positions of the presidential candidates during the 2016 election.

III – Goal

The third coding category is goal. This category is used to uncover the goal of a meme, meaning the aim with which a meme and its message were spread. The goal of the messages spread by memes can be to support, critique or delegitimize the presidential candidates during the 2016

U.S. election. Critiquing entails that the presidential candidates and/or their ideas are negatively judged in the memes. Delegitimizing entails that the memes are used to undermine the presidential candidates by mocking or ridiculing them and/or their ideas (Ross & Rivers, 2017, pp.1-2). This category will provide insights into how the political memes might have affected the positions of the main presidential candidates Trump and Clinton.

IV – Party affiliation

The fourth coding category is party affiliation. It is used to establish which political party is being discussed in a meme. The U.S. is dominated by a two-party system which consists of the Democratic party and the Republican party. This entails that one of these two parties always wins the presidential election. However, other smaller parties have emerged too. Party affiliation can refer to the political party of the presidential candidate, but it is also possible that a meme refers to a political party in general. This is important, because opinions about a presidential candidate can affect opinions about a political party in general and vice versa.

V – Humour

The fifth coding category is humour. This category is used to determine whether humour was used in a meme. Humour is an important category to discuss because it is essential for resonance, meaning that humour is used in memes in order to get larger groups of people to resonate with them. The sort of humour used in memes varies from simple jokes to outright inappropriate humour, and anything in between (Milner, 2015, pp.31-32). Essentially then, this category will determine whether a meme is funny or not. Of course, whether something is considered as funny or not is highly personal. Therefore, in order to be as objective as possible, a scale of humour has been created which includes the following scales of humour: 1 – no humour, 2 – joke, 3 – irony, 4 – sarcasm, 5 – satire, and 6 – inappropriate humour. Joke is defined as a simple and fun form of humour, as something which is “said or done to provoke laughter” (Joke, n.d.). Irony is defined as something that is said, usually with a humorous intention, “in which the intended meaning is the opposite of what is seemingly expressed” (Irony, n.d.). Sarcasm is defined as a form of irony “that is designed to cut or give pain” (Sarcasm, n.d.). Satire is defined as something “that exposes or ridicules conduct, doctrines, or institutions either by direct criticism or more often through irony, parody, or caricature” (Satire, n.d.). Inappropriate humour is defined as humour that is shocking and not appropriate.

VI – Fake news

The sixth category is fake news. This category is used to determine whether a meme was used in order to spread fake news. When defining fake news, it is important to mention that fake news is part of a larger spectrum of mis- and disinformation which stretches from innocent satire to fabricated content that has the intent to harm. Thus, fake news can have different meanings depending on whether it is used to spread misinformation or disinformation. For the purpose of the research of this thesis fake news is defined as deliberately fabricated disinformation that is created in order to deceive or do harm (Desai, Mooney & Oehrli, 2018). Hoaxes also fall under this definition. Hoaxes are defined as schemes which are used to delegitimize/undermine the opponent candidate by deceiving voters into believing something untrue about them (Hoax, n.d.). This extreme definition of fake news was chosen in order to be able to show when memes cross the boundary of deliberate fake news. This category is useful to research because it can provide some insight into part of the effect that fake news has had on the 2016 election and on the positions of the presidential candidates.

VII – Meme complexity

The seventh and final category is meme complexity. It is used to determine the complexity of a meme, meaning the different layers of which a meme consists. Memes are multimodal. Multimodality entails that memes carry several modes of communication in their messages. Memes combine written and visual modes of communication and as a result they resonate with large group of groups of people. Thus, memes consist of multiple layers of meaning, which can be found both in the texts and in the images used (Milner, 2015, pp.23-25). It is argued that in order to understand these different layers of memes a form of meme literacy is needed. This entails that the more layers a meme has, the more knowledge about memes is needed in order to understand it (Shifman, 2014, p.60). However, one does not need to fully understand a meme in order to resonate with it. Understanding one layer of a meme can be sufficient in order to resonate with it. Therefore, it is interesting to research the complexity of the political memes that were spread during the 2016 election.

4.2.3. General coding frame

I – Meme source

On both knowyourmeme.com and me.me it is possible to see what the original sources of the meme were, meaning where a meme was originally shared. From this the following subcategories have been established which were used for coding the memes: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Imgur, Tumblr, Reddit, 9Gag, 4Chan, User upload, and Unknown. User upload refers to memes which were directly uploaded to the meme databases. Except for User Upload, all these memes sources are social media platforms.

II – Time period

On both knowyourmeme.com and me.me it is possible to see the time period in which the memes were uploaded. These will be used in order to establish to which of the two time periods a meme belongs. The two time periods of this study, the announcement and primaries period and the general election period, are also the subcategories of this category which were used for coding the memes.

III – Meme category

The meme category of the memes can be coded by analysing the form of a meme. The subcategories of this category are copying and repackaging. Repackaging can take two forms: mimicry and remixing. This entails that the memes in the sample are copied, mimicked, or remixed. These subcategories were used for coding the memes.

IV – Meme genre

By analysing the form of the memes, it is possible to see to which meme genre a meme belongs. The subcategories which were used for coding the memes are image macros, panel comparison memes, captioned memes, template memes, Photoshopped memes, and reaction memes.

V – Visibility

The visibility of the presidential candidates in the memes can be coded by analysing whether they are visible in the image and/or whether they are mentioned in the text of the meme. The focus is on the main candidates Trump and Clinton. Additionally, the categories about another presidential candidate were added to make sure that the other relevant presidential candidates are also accounted for in the coding frame. From this, the following subcategories have been created which were used for coding the memes: Trump in image, Trump in text, Trump not

visible, Clinton in image, Clinton in text, Clinton not visible, other candidate(s) in image, other candidate(s) in text, and no other candidate(s) visible.

VI – Sentiment

The sentiment about the presidential candidates in the memes can be coded by analysing the tone of the image of the meme and/or the text of the meme. This tone can be negative, positive or neutral. Again, this category focusses on Trump, Clinton, and other presidential candidates. From this, the following subcategories were created which were used for coding the memes: positive about Trump, negative about Trump, neutral about Trump, no sentiment about Trump, positive about Clinton, negative about Clinton, neutral about Clinton, no sentiment about Clinton, positive about other candidate(s), negative about other candidate(s), neutral about other candidate(s), no sentiment about other candidate(s).

VII – Popular culture

It is possible to code popular culture references in the memes by analysing whether the meme refers to a film, song, or TV show. From this the following subcategories have been created which were used for coding the memes: films, music, TV shows, none. Films refers to film stills, actors, and quotes from films. Music refers to concerts and festivals, popular singers of songs, and the lyrics of the songs. TV shows encompasses film stills, actors, and quotes from TV shows. None entails that no popular culture reference was made in a meme.

4.2.4. In-depth coding frame

I – Popularity

The popularity of memes can be coded by using the popularity scale. The popularity scale was divided in five scales: 1 – not so popular, 2 – somewhat popular, 3 – popular, 4 – very popular, and 5 – extremely popular. These five scales are also the subcategories of this category which were used for the coding of the memes.

II – Message

It is possible to code the message of the memes by analysing their tone. This category focusses on Trump, Clinton, and other presidential candidates. From this the following subcategories were created which were used for the coding of the memes: no clear message, negative message, positive message, and neutral message. If there is a clear message in the meme, the meme immediately falls into the subcategories negative message, positive message, and neutral

message. For each of these subcategories the following subdivisions apply message about Trump, message about Clinton, message about another presidential candidate, message not about a presidential candidate.

III – Goal

By analysing whether the meme is used to support, critique or delegitimize the presidential candidates, the goal of the meme can be coded. This category focusses on Trump, Clinton, and other presidential candidates. From this the following subcategories were created which were used for the coding of the memes: support Trump, critique Trump, delegitimize Trump, support Clinton, critique Clinton, delegitimize Clinton, support another presidential candidate, critique another presidential candidate, delegitimize another presidential candidate.

IV – Party affiliation

The reference to party affiliation in memes can be coded by analysing whether the meme refers to a political party in its image and/or text. From this the following subcategories were created which were used for the coding of the memes: Democratic party, Republican party, Other, None. Other refers to the several minor and independent parties in the U.S

V – Humour

It is possible to code the use of humour in the memes by using the scale of humour. This scale consists of six scales: 1 – no humour, 2 – joke, 3 – irony, 4 – sarcasm, 5 – satire, and 6 – inappropriate humour. These six scales are also the subcategories of this coding category which were used for the coding of the memes.

VI – Fake news

The role of fake news in the memes can be coded by analysing the truthfulness of the messages of a meme. In order to do so, the claims made in the meme have to be fact checked online. To determine whether a meme is indeed spreading fake news the following subcategories have been formulated: not fake news, hoax, fabricated lie.

VI – Meme complexity

The complexity of the memes can be coded by analysing the number of layers that a meme has. Memes have at least two layers. Usually these two layers are the text and the image, but it can also be that the image is the first layers and a photoshopped alteration is the second layer.

Mememes cannot consist of one layer, because just an image is not a mememe. In addition, mememes normally have no more than five layers. Consequently, the following subcategories were formulated which were also used for the coding of the mememes: 1 – two layers, 2 – three layers, 3 – four layers, 4 – five layers, and 5 – more than five layers.

5. Analysis

This chapter will discuss the results of the main coding for both coding frames and the analysis of these results. The results of the main coding will be provided in two tables, one table per coding frame, and in addition in-text elaboration on these results will be given. Hereafter, the results will be analysed. On the basis of this analysis suggestions and conclusions about the results will be made. In the conclusion these are used to test the hypothesis and to answer the main question.

5.1. Results

For both coding frames, a trial coding was conducted in order to check whether the coding frames indeed covered all relevant aspects of the material. After the trial coding, some of the main and subcategories were revised and expanded. The trial coding for the general coding frame consisted of fifteen memes and for the in-depth coding frame of five memes. Hereafter, the main coding was conducted.

To start, the general coding was conducted on the complete meme sample of 138 memes. The results from the general coding can be found in table 2. In this table, the results from the coding per main category and per subcategory of the main category are given. The results are given in percentages of memes. This entails the percentage of the total number of memes that were coded for a certain subcategory. For example, for the category meme source 20,3% of the memes were coded for the subcategory 'Facebook'. This entails that of the total of 138 memes in the meme sample, 20,3% was originally shared on Facebook. In addition, in-text elaboration on the results and the most important findings of the general coding per main category will be given.

After this, the in-depth coding was conducted on the randomly selected second meme sample consisting of 40 memes. The results from the in-depth coding can be found in table 3. In this table, the results from the coding per main category and per subcategory of the main category are given. Again, the results are given in percentages of memes. In addition, in-text elaboration on the results and the most important findings of the first coding per main category will be given.

5.1.1. Results of the general coding frame in table

Table 2 – Results general coding frame in percentages of memes

I - MEME SOURCE		PERCENTAGES OF MEMES (%)
<i>Facebook</i>		20,3%
<i>Twitter</i>		18,1%
<i>Instagram</i>		14,5%
<i>Imgur</i>		17,4%
<i>Tumblr</i>		2,1%
<i>Reddit</i>		6,5%
<i>9Gag</i>		0,7%
<i>4Chan</i>		1,4%
<i>User Upload</i>		13,8%
<i>Unknown</i>		5,2%
II - TIME PERIOD		
<i>Announcement and primaries period</i>		50%
<i>General election period</i>		50%
III - MEME CATEGORY		
<i>Copying</i>		0%
<i>Mimicry</i>		25,4%
<i>Remixing</i>		74,6%
IV - MEME GENRE		
<i>Image macros</i>		16,7%
<i>Panel comparison memes</i>		11,6%
<i>Captioned memes</i>		18,8%
<i>Template memes</i>		2,9%
<i>Photoshopped memes</i>		50%
<i>Reaction memes</i>		0%
V - VISIBILITY		
Trump		
<i>Trump visible</i>		51,4%
<i>Trump in image</i>		34,1%
<i>Trump in text</i>		31,2%
<i>Trump not visible</i>		48,6%
Clinton		
<i>Clinton visible</i>		29%
<i>Clinton in image</i>		21,7%
<i>Clinton in text</i>		15,2%
<i>Clinton not visible</i>		71,0%
Other candidate(s)		
<i>Other candidate(s) visible</i>		28,3%
<i>Other candidate(s) in image</i>		23,9%
<i>Other candidate(s) in text</i>		16,7%
<i>No other candidate(s) visible</i>		71,7%

VI - SENTIMENT	
<i>Positive sentiment</i>	10,9%
<i>Negative sentiment</i>	65,9%
<i>Neutral sentiment</i>	46,4%
Trump	
<i>Sentiment about Trump</i>	57,2%
<i>Positive about Trump</i>	7,2%
<i>Negative about Trump</i>	29,7%
<i>Neutral about Trump</i>	20,3%
<i>No sentiment about Trump</i>	42,8%
Clinton	
<i>Sentiment about Clinton</i>	36,2%
<i>Positive about Clinton</i>	0,7%
<i>Negative about Clinton</i>	24,6%
<i>Neutral about Clinton</i>	10,9%
<i>No sentiment about Clinton</i>	63,8%
Other candidate(s)	
<i>Sentiment about other candidate(s)</i>	29,7%
<i>Positive about other candidate(s)</i>	2,9%
<i>Negative about other candidate(s)</i>	11,6%
<i>Neutral about other candidate(s)</i>	15,2%
<i>No sentiment about other candidate(s)</i>	20,3%
VII - POPULAR CULTURE	
<i>Films</i>	11,6%
<i>Music</i>	3,6%
<i>TV Series</i>	12,3%
<i>None</i>	72,5%

5.1.2. In-text elaboration on the results of the general coding frame

Statistics coding

I – Meme source

First of all, the coding of the meme source has provided some insights into where the political memes during the 2016 election were coming from. Almost all memes (81%) were shared on a social media platform. The top three of popular meme sources were Facebook, Twitter, and Imgur. Instagram came on a close fourth place, having only one a 0,5% difference with Imgur. In addition, 13,8% of the memes were coded as being uploaded by a user. Of 5,2% of the memes the source was unknown. Only a few memes were shared Reddit, Tumblr, 4Chan, and 9Gag (together 10,7%).

II – Time period

The coding of the time period has shown how many memes were shared in each time period. As a result of pure coincidence, exactly half of the memes were shared in the announcement and primaries period and half were shared in the general election period. This even split between the two time periods allows for some deeper analysis of the memes in other categories. An even comparison can be made between the two time periods of a specific coding category. Consequently, an even comparison can be made between the effects of a certain coding category on the two different positions of Trump.

Form coding

III – Meme category

The coding of the meme category has given some notion about how the memes were created during the 2016 election. Clearly, remixing was the most used meme category, as 74,6% of the memes were coded for this subcategory. Only a fourth of the memes were coded for mimicry (25,4%). Interestingly, no memes were coded for copying.

IV – Meme genre

The coding of the meme genre has provided some insight into what kind of meme genres were used in the memes during the 2016 election. The most popular meme genre was Photoshopped memes. Half of the memes in the sample were coded for Photoshopped memes. The other half of the memes were coded for captioned memes (18,8%), image macros (16,7%), panel comparison memes (11,6%), and template memes (2,9%). No memes were coded for reaction memes.

Content coding

V – Visibility

The coding of visibility has revealed the visibility of Trump in comparison to Clinton and the other presidential candidates in the memes during the 2016 election. Trump was visible in image and/or text in more than half of the memes (51,4%). Clinton was visible in image and/or text of only 29% of the memes. In 28,3% of the memes other presidential candidates were visible. This shows that of all the presidential candidates, Trump was visible most in the memes. Also, in 10,9% of the memes both Trump and Hillary are visible, and in 10,9% of the memes both Trump and other candidate(s) are visible. Thus, only 21,8% of the memes focused on

multiple presidential candidates, which means that the majority of the memes focused on one presidential candidate (78,3%).

Considering the big difference in the number of presidential candidates in the two time periods, the memes in this category were also coded for visibility per time period. In order to draw conclusions about Trump's different positions in the two time periods, a closer look at the visibility of Trump in both time periods is necessary. For coherency purposes these results were not included in table 2, but it is relevant to mention them here. In the announcement and primaries period Trump is visible in 53,6% of the memes. Other presidential candidates are visible in 56,5% of the memes. And Clinton is only visible in 10,1% of the memes. In the general election period Trump is visible in 51,5% of the memes and Clinton is visible in 47,8% of the memes. No other candidates are visible in the memes of the general election period. This comparison shows that Trump's visibility in the memes remained rather constant in the two time periods, while Clinton's visibility increased significantly in the general election period. In addition, it shows that Trump was consistently more visible in the memes than Clinton.

VI – Sentiment

The coding of sentiment has uncovered the sentiments in the memes about Trump in comparison to Clinton and the other presidential candidates in the memes during the 2016 election. The majority of the memes expressed a negative sentiment (65,9%), around half expressed a neutral sentiment (46,4%), and only a small number expressed a positive sentiment (10,9%).

More than half of the memes (57,2%) expressed a sentiment about Trump. Of these memes 29,7% were negative about Trump, 20,3% were neutral, and only 7,2% were positive. More than a third of the memes (36,2%) expressed a sentiment about Clinton. Of these memes 24,6% were negative about Clinton, 10,9% were neutral, and only 0,7% were positive. Finally, around a third of the memes (29,7%) expressed a sentiment about other candidate(s). Of these memes 15,2% were neutral, 11,6% were negative, and only 2,9% were positive. In addition, the memes were more negative about Clinton than about Trump and the other candidates. This is shown by the fact that more than two-thirds of the memes about Clinton are negative (68%), while only roughly half of the memes about Trump (51,9%) and a third of the memes about other candidate(s) (39%) are negative. Finally, 26,1% of the memes contained multiple sentiments about different candidates. Most of these were about Trump and Clinton.

As in the previous category visibility, the memes in this category were also coded for sentiment per time period. In the announcement and primaries period more than half of the

memes (53,6%) expressed a sentiment about Trump. Of these memes 56,8% were negative, 35,1% were neutral, and only 8,1% were positive. Only 10,1% of the memes in this period expressed a sentiment about Clinton. Of these memes 42,9% were negative, 57,1% were neutral, and none were positive. Also, more than half of the memes (59,4%) expressed a sentiment about another candidate. Of these memes 39% were negative, 51,2% were neutral, and only 9,8% were positive. Thus, in the announcement and primaries periods the memes were relatively most negative about Trump and least negative about other candidates. In the general election period more than half of the memes (60,9%) expressed a sentiment about Trump. Of these memes 47,6% were negative, 35,7% were neutral, and only 16,7% were positive. In addition, more than half of the memes (62,3%) expressed a sentiment about Clinton. Of these memes the 72,1% were negative, 25,6% were neutral, and only 2,3% were positive. No memes expressed a sentiment about other candidates. This comparison shows that the memes became less negative about Trump in the general election period (dropped from 56,8% to 47,8%), while the memes become more negative about Clinton in the same period (increased from 43,9% to 72,1%).

VII – Popular culture

Finally, the coding of popular culture has provided some important insights into the role that popular culture references played in the memes during the 2016 election. The majority of the memes contained no popular culture reference. Of the memes that did contain a popular culture reference 12,3% referred to a TV Series, 11,6% referred to a film, and only 3,6% referred to music.

5.1.3. Results of the in-depth coding frame

Table 3 – Results of the in-depth coding frame in memes in percentages

I – POPULARITY		MEMES IN PERCENTAGES (%)	
<i>1: Not so popular</i>		22%	
<i>2: Somewhat popular</i>		37%	
<i>3: Popular</i>		32%	
<i>4: Very popular</i>		7%	
<i>5: Extremely popular</i>		2%	
II – MESSAGE			
Positive message		10%	
<i>About Trump</i>		7,5%	
<i>About Clinton</i>		2,5%	
<i>About another candidate</i>		2,5%	
<i>Not about a candidate</i>		0%	
Negative message		52,5%	
<i>About Trump</i>		17,5%	
<i>About Clinton</i>		25%	
<i>About another candidate</i>		20%	
<i>Not about a candidate</i>		5%	
Neutral message		42,5%	
<i>About Trump</i>		32,5%	
<i>About Clinton</i>		5%	
<i>About another candidate</i>		7,5%	
<i>Not about a candidate</i>		0%	
No clear message		0%	
III – GOAL			
Trump			
<i>Support Trump</i>		7,5%	
<i>Critique Trump</i>		7,5%	
<i>Delegitimize Trump</i>		45%	
Clinton			
<i>Support Clinton</i>		2,5%	
<i>Critique Clinton</i>		15%	
<i>Delegitimize Clinton</i>		12,5%	
Another candidate			
<i>Support another candidate</i>		2,5%	
<i>Critique another candidate</i>		10%	
<i>Delegitimize another candidate</i>		20%	
IV – PARTY AFFILIATION			
<i>Republican party</i>		17%	
<i>Democratic party</i>		2%	
<i>Other</i>		0%	
<i>None</i>		81%	
V – HUMOUR			

<i>1: No humour</i>	7,5%
<i>2: Joke</i>	50%
<i>3: Irony</i>	15%
<i>4: Sarcasm</i>	5%
<i>5: Satire</i>	20%
<i>6: Inappropriate humour</i>	2,5%
VI – FAKE NEWS	
<i>No fake news</i>	97,5%
<i>Hoax</i>	2,5%
<i>Fabricated lie</i>	0%
VII – MEME COMPLEXITY	
<i>1: Two layers</i>	52,5%
<i>2: Three layers</i>	30%
<i>3: Four layers</i>	12,5%
<i>4: Five layers</i>	5%
<i>5: More than five layers</i>	0%

5.1.4. In-text elaboration on the results of the in-depth coding frame

Statistics coding

I – Popularity

The coding of the popularity of the memes has shown that the majority of the memes during the 2016 election are somewhat popular (37%) or popular (32%). Only a very small amount of the memes was very popular or extremely popular (9%). And around one-fifth of the memes were coded as not so popular (22%). Thus, the majority of the memes had at least some popularity. Importantly, there is no significant difference between the two time periods in popularity composition.

In-depth content coding

II - Message

The coding of the messages of the memes has revealed that all memes in the sample contained a clear political message. The majority of the memes contained a negative message (52,5%). More than a third of the memes contained a neutral message (42,5%). And almost none of the memes contained a positive message (10%). Compared to the other candidates the majority of the memes that contained a negative message were about Clinton (25%). Contrarily, the majority of the memes that contained a neutral or positive message were about Trump (respectively 32,5% and 7,5%). Overall, the messages in the memes were more negative about Clinton (25%) and the other candidates (20%) than about Trump (17,5%). In addition, 25% of

the memes contained multiple messages. The majority of these memes were negative about Clinton and positive about Trump, negative about Clinton and other candidates, or negative about both Clinton and Trump.

Importantly, a comparison of the two time periods shows that the number of memes with a negative message about Trump decreased in the general election period (from 20% to 15%), while the number of memes with a negative message about Clinton increased (from 15% to 35%). In addition, the number of memes with a positive message about Trump increased in the general election period (from 5% till 10%). Ultimately, the coding of the messages in the memes has shown that the messages were overall more negative about Clinton than about Trump.

III – Goal

The coding of the goals of the memes has shown that the goal of the majority of the memes during the 2016 election was to delegitimize a presidential candidate. Almost half of the memes had as their goal to delegitimize Trump (45%). A fifth of the delegitimizing memes were about another candidate and only 12,5% were about Clinton. So, there were more memes that had as their goal to delegitimize Trump than to delegitimize Clinton. In addition, only a small part of the memes had as their goal to support a candidate. Importantly, there were more memes that had as their goal to support Trump (7,5%) than to support Clinton or another presidential candidate (both 2,5%). Finally, critiquing a presidential candidate was the least frequent goal of the memes. Importantly, a comparison of the two time periods showed that the number of memes that had as their goal to delegitimize Trump (from 40% to 50%) or to delegitimize Clinton (from 0% to 25%) both increased in the general election period. Overall, the coding of the goals of the memes has shown that the goal of the majority of the memes was to delegitimize the presidential candidates and specifically to delegitimize Trump.

IV – Party affiliation

The coding of the party affiliation in the memes revealed that party affiliation did not play a major role in the majority of the memes during the 2016 election. As already shown by the coding of the messages in the memes, the main focus of the memes was on the individual presidential candidates and not so much on their political parties. Nevertheless, around a fifth of the memes did refer to a political party (19%). These memes were spread during the announcement and primaries period and almost all of them featured the Republican Party (or

the GOP). Only one meme referred to the Democratic Party, but this meme also featured the Republican Party.

V – Humour

The coding of the use of humour in the memes showed that almost all memes during the 2016 election used a form of humour. Half of the memes used jokes. After jokes, the most popular forms of humour used in the memes were respectively satire (20%) and irony (15%). This shows a mix in the use of more light and fun humour and the use of more harsh humour that is used to critique or expose. Sarcasm was used in 5% of the memes and inappropriate humour was only used in one meme. There is no significant difference between the two time periods in the use of humour. Overall, the majority of the memes used some form of the more light and fun humour.

VI – Fake news

The coding of the role of fake news in the memes uncovered that only on one occasion a meme was used to spread fake news during the 2016 election. Namely, this meme was used to spread a conspiracy theory about Ted Cruz secretly being the Zodiac Killer. The Zodiac Killer is the nickname of an unidentified serial killer who claimed to have killed a lot of people in a number of letters sent to newspapers in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Alexander, 2016). Despite that ‘Ted Cruz is the Zodiac Killer’ started as a joke it quickly cultivated to an elaborate internet conspiracy theory.

VII – Meme complexity

Finally, the coding of the complexity of the memes has shown that the majority of the memes were not very complex as they did not consist of many layers. More than half of the memes consisted of only two layers and a third of the memes consisted of three layers. Only 17,5% of the memes consisted of more than three layers and none of the memes consisted of more than five layers. There is no significant difference between the two time periods in meme complexity. So, overall, simplicity seems to have been at the core of the memes which were spread during the 2016 election.

5.2. Analysis

After having elaborated on the results of the two levels of coding, the meaning of these results will now be analysed. First, the results from the general coding frame will be analysed and then the results from the in-depth coding frame will be analysed. From this suggestions and conclusions will be drawn which can be used to test the hypotheses and answer the main question of this thesis in the conclusion.

5.2.1. Analysis of the results of the general coding frame

Statistics coding

I – Meme source

The coding of the meme source has shown that the most popular sources for meme sharing during the 2016 election were Facebook, Twitter, Imgur, and Instagram. This shows that social media platforms have played a significant role in the propagation of the political memes. The majority of the memes (81%) were shared on social media platforms.

II – Time period

The coding of the time period showed that there was an even division of the memes in the sample between the two time periods. This suggests that memes played a role in both the announcement and primaries period and the general election period. The creation and spread of political memes about the presidential candidates during the 2016 election thus appear to have been established during both time periods.

Form coding

III – Meme category

The coding of meme category has shown that all memes were created by repackaging and none by copying. This suggests that some form of originality in the memes was important. For both forms of repackaging changing something about the form and/or content of a meme is essential. Even when meme creators re-used a certain image and/or text, meme format, or meme template, they still made some changes to it in order to create a new meme. They did not simply copy already existing memes, but they changed the form and/or content in order to express their own political preference and/or opinion. Thus, the political memes during the 2016 election were indeed used to express personal political opinions and/or preferences. This shows that Shifman (2014) was correct in her definition of political memes.

IV – Meme genre

The coding of meme genre revealed that half of the memes were Photoshopped memes, meaning that they were created by using some kind of photo manipulation programme. Photoshopped memes tend to take more time to create than the other meme genres. This is because these other meme genres are mostly created with meme generators and meme format apps, which are faster to use. Nevertheless, the creation of memes by using any of the discussed meme genres is still more time-consuming than copying memes. This shows that the creators of the memes that were propagated during the 2016 election did not only put their own ideas and preferences, but also their time into the creation of these memes. Ultimately, this indicates a commitment to the creation and propagation of these memes and their political messages.

Content coding

V – Visibility

The coding of visibility has shown that the majority of the memes focused on one presidential candidate and that Trump is the most visible candidate in the memes. This is relevant because this focus on individual candidates gives the memes the potential to influence the individual positions of the candidates in the 2016 election. Moreover, it indicates that Trump was the presidential candidate that generated most interest and attention. Whether this was positive, negative, or neutral is not relevant here. What matters is that it made Trump a preferred topic in political memes. In addition, Trump's visibility in the memes remained constant in both time periods. This implies that the interest in and attention for Trump remained rather constant during the entire election period, even when he was not yet one of the main contenders for the presidency. Thus, political memes had the possibility to influence Trump's position significantly throughout the 2016 election. This shows that Heiskanen (2017) was correct when she suggested that Trump was a popular meme subject.

Contrarily, Clinton's visibility increased significantly in the general election period after being almost non-existent in the announcement and primaries period. This suggests that there was less interest in and attention for Clinton in political memes in the announcement and primaries period than there was for Trump. However, interest in Clinton did increase in the general election period which also made her, together with Trump, a preferred topic in political memes.

VI – Sentiment

Moreover, the coding of sentiment revealed that the majority of the memes expressed a negative sentiment and almost none expressed a positive sentiment. This suggests that the content of memes tends to be inherently negative, which increases their potential to undermine the individual positions of the presidential candidates. Additionally, the memes were overall more negative about Clinton than about Trump and other candidates. More so, while the memes became less negative about Trump in the general election period, they became more negative about Clinton. This change might have positively affected Trump's position and negatively affected Clinton's position during the general election period.

VII – Popular culture

Furthermore, the coding of popular culture showed that popular culture references in the form of films, music, and TV shows did not play a large role in the memes. Thus, this suggests that these kinds of references played a less significant role than Milner (2015) argued. Nevertheless, popular culture still played an important role in the memes. The absence of an abundance of references to films, music, and TV shows suggests that the content of the memes, namely the current political issues and popular political opinions in the U.S., were sufficient to resonate with large parts of the U.S. public. Apparently, political culture references were not necessary in order to make people resonate with the content of the memes. The shared popular political opinions were sufficient. This thus shows, as argued by Heiskanen & Butters (2017), the increasing interlinking of political and popular culture in the U.S. during the 2016 election. In addition, their U.S. specific content suggests that the political memes were not created to resonate with people from outside the U.S.

Summary of the results of the general coding frame

Ultimately, the analysis of the results of the general coding frame has provided some important insights, suggestions, and conclusions about the political memes which were spread during the 2016 election. These will be summarized here for clarity purposes. First of all, social media platforms have played a significant role in the propagation of the political memes. Moreover, the creation and spread of political memes seems to have been common and frequent in both of the time periods. In addition, all the memes were created by using some kind of originality, meaning that the memes were used to express the personal political opinions and/or preferences of their creators. Importantly, the creators of the memes did not only use the political memes to express their own opinions and/or preferences, but they also put their time into creating the

memes. This indicates a commitment to the creation and spread of the memes and their political messages.

Furthermore, in both time periods the majority of the political memes focused on Trump as their sole subject, meaning that these memes thus had the possibility to influence Trump's position during the 2016 election. In addition, the majority of the memes seemed to be inherently negative, which increased their potential to undermine the individual positions of the presidential candidates. Specifically, the memes were becoming more negative about Clinton and less negative about Trump in the general election period, which could have weakened Clinton's position and strengthened Trump's positions. Finally, popular political opinions were sufficient to make the memes resonate with large groups of the U.S. citizens. This thus shows the increasing interlinking of political and popular culture in the U.S. during the 2016 election.

5.2.2. Analysis of the results of the in-depth coding frame

Statistics coding

I – Popularity

The coding of popularity revealed that the majority of the memes enjoyed at least some popularity. This is significant, because the more popular a meme was, the more likes and/or shares it generated, and thus the more attention it got. Popular memes had the most potential to influence the individual candidates' positions. However, even the somewhat popular memes generated more than 250 likes and/or shares, meaning that their political messages still reached significant amounts of people which gave them the power to influence people. Thus, the majority of the memes in the sample had the possibility to influence the individual candidates' positions (78%). Following from this logic, the majority of the memes about Trump were thus capable of influencing his position during the 2016 election. This also suggests that Milner (2015) was correct when he argued that memes are intertwined with the popular.

In-depth content coding

II – Message

The coding of the message of the memes showed that the majority of the memes contained a negative political message. This indicates that negativity was a frequent characteristic of the majority of the political memes during the 2016 election. Specifically, the messages were more negative about Clinton and the other candidates than about Trump. And the messages were more positive about Trump than about Clinton and the other candidates. In addition, the number of memes with a negative message about Trump decreased in the general election period while

the number of memes with a negative message about Clinton increased. On the basis of this data, the suggestion can be made that on the basis of their messages, the memes had the potential to strengthen Trump's position in both time periods. Simultaneously, they had the potential to weaken the other candidates' positions in the announcement and primaries period and Clinton's position during the general election period.

III – Goal

The coding of the goal of the memes showed that the goal of the majority of the memes was to delegitimize the presidential candidates and specifically to delegitimize Trump. Nevertheless, the number of memes that had as their goal to delegitimize Trump or to delegitimize Clinton both increased in the general election period. This suggests that the desire to use memes to delegitimize the presidential candidates increased in the general election period. This makes sense, because the 2016 election was often described as a choice between “the lesser of two evils”, meaning that many people did not want either of the candidates as their president (Heiskanen, 2017). Then it makes sense that delegitimization of the candidates was the most popular goal in these memes, because the goal of delegitimization is to weaken the position of the candidates by ridiculing and mocking them. This can be linked to the negative messages of the majority of the memes. Negative messages and delegitimizing seemed to have gone hand in hand in most of the memes in this sample. An example of such a meme that was negative and tried to delegitimize both candidates is meme 3. Ultimately, these types of delegitimizing memes had the potential to weaken the positions of both Trump and Clinton.

when the debate memes are funny but
then u remember this is the state of our
country rn



Meme 3 – Example of a negative meme with the goal to delegitimize both presidential candidates

IV – Party affiliation

The coding of party affiliation revealed that in the majority of the memes the main focus was on the individual presidential candidates and not so much on their political parties. When party affiliation did play a role in the memes, it usually was about the Republican party and these memes were all spread during the announcement and primaries period. This makes sense because the Republican primaries generated a lot of attention because seventeen candidates entered the race for the Republican presidential nomination. This was the largest presidential primary that was held for any political party at that point in the history of the U.S. However, even with the attention surrounding the republican presidential candidates in the primaries, the main focus of the memes was still on the individual presidential candidates. Again, this shows that with this focus the majority of the memes had the potential to influence the individual positions of the candidates during the 2016 election.

V – Humour

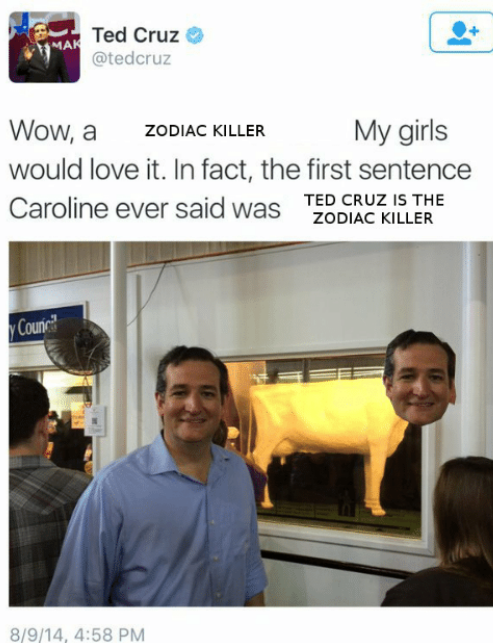
The coding of humour showed that almost all memes used humour and the majority used some form of the more light and fun humour. Thus, jokes and irony, which have a humorous intent, seem to have been the most popular type of humour for the political memes during the 2016 election. This suggests that the majority of the memes were not spread with the intent to harm the presidential candidates through humour, but that humour was used in order to question, critique, and delegitimize them. Making fun of a presidential candidate by using a joke or irony can be a delegitimization strategy. Even innocent jokes can still be used to show or tell something about the presidential candidate which causes people to take the candidate less serious or to trust the candidate less. An example of a meme which uses a seemingly innocent joke to ridicule and delegitimize a presidential candidate is meme 4. This meme mocks Trump for his small hands. This joke was used as a delegitimization strategy because it aimed to undermine Trump as a serious presidential candidate. However, it is important to realize that the use of inappropriate humour as a delegitimization strategy will likely have had a larger impact on the positions of the presidential candidates, than the use of jokes as a delegitimization strategy.



Meme 4 – Example of a meme which uses a joke to delegitimize a presidential candidate

VI – Fake news

The coding of fake news uncovered that fake news did not play an important role in the memes during the 2016 election. There was one meme that was used to spread the Ted Cruz is the Zodiac Killer conspiracy theory. See meme 5 for the visualisation of this meme. Logically, spreading such fake news allegations about a person can have serious negative consequences. Therefore, this meme is a clear example of where memes cross the border from misinformation to deliberately fabricated fake news. Nevertheless, the fact that there was just one meme which was used to spread fake news in the sample suggests that this border is rarely crossed in political memes. Therefore, it can be concluded that although fake news was present in the memes during the 2016 election, it was not such a big and frequent issue in memes as has been argued by Ball (2017).



Meme 5 – The Ted Cruz is the Zodiac Killer meme

VII – Meme complexity

Finally, the coding of meme complexity showed that simplicity was at the core of the memes which were spread during the 2016 election. The majority of the memes consisted of only two or three layers. This suggests that simple memes were sufficient to spread the political messages during the 2016 election. It also suggests that the majority of the memes were thus easy to resonate with for large groups of people. This increases the effects that these memes could have had on the individual positions of the presidential candidates. Importantly, even simple memes take some time and effort to make and therefore they are still indicative of a commitment to the creation and diffusion of political memes.

Summary of the results of the in-depth coding frame

Ultimately, the analysis of the results of the in-depth coding frame has provided some important insights, suggestions, and conclusions about the political memes which were spread during the 2016 election. These will be summarized here for clarity purposes. First of all, the majority of the memes enjoyed at least some popularity, meaning that they had the possibility to reach a significant number of people and thus had the potential to influence the individual positions of the presidential candidates. Specifically, the majority of the memes about Trump were thus capable of influencing Trump's position during the 2016 election. Moreover, the majority of the messages of the memes were negative, which increased their potential to undermine the individual positions of the presidential candidates. The majority of the messages was more negative about the other presidential candidates and Clinton than about Trump. Specifically, the messages were becoming less negative about Trump and more negative about Clinton in the general election period. Consequently, the memes had the potential to strengthen Trump's position in both time periods, and to weaken the other candidates' positions in the announcement and primaries period and Clinton's position during the general election period.

In addition, the majority of the memes had as their goal to delegitimize the presidential candidates. Negative messages and delegitimizing seemed to have gone hand in hand in most of the memes and such memes had the potential to weaken the positions of both Trump and Clinton. Furthermore, party affiliation did not play a large role in the memes, which shows that the memes had an individual focus. This increased the probability that they influenced the individual positions of the presidential candidates. Furthermore, the majority of the memes used a form of light and fun humour. This suggests that humour is used in order to critique and delegitimize the presidential candidates. Making fun of a presidential candidate by using a joke

or irony can be a delegitimization strategy, but this will likely have less impact than using inappropriate humour as a delegitimization strategy. Also, fake news was present in the memes, but it was not a big and frequent issue in memes. This suggests that the border from misinformation to deliberately fabricated fake news was rarely crossed in the memes. Finally, simplicity was at the core of the majority of the memes, meaning that the memes were easy to resonate with. This increased the potential of the memes to influence the individual positions of the presidential candidates.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Finally, this thesis can now test and discuss its hypotheses based on the combination of the arguments already made in the literature review, and the suggestions and conclusions that were made on basis of the results of the two coding frames. First, hypotheses H2 till H6 will be tested and then the main hypothesis H1 will be tested. Hereafter, the meaning of the results of the hypotheses testing will be discussed. Then, the limitations of the research will be elaborated on. Subsequently, the possible avenues for future research will be discussed. Finally, the main research question will be answered, and the conclusions of this thesis will be given.

6.1. Discussion of the hypotheses

H2: *Political memes stimulated political participation in the U.S.*

Hypothesis two was proved to be correct. As became already evident from the research of Shifman (2014), Milner (2015), and Yao (2016), political memes can be seen as a form of political participation because they are used by their creators to politically express themselves and to influence political outcomes. As the political memes are spread and shared, they become part of the public debate and of shared social mindsets. This led to the interlinking of the political and popular culture spheres in the U.S. during the 2016 election. As a result, political memes have the power to mobilize voters who were previously not involved in formal offline political participation. Ultimately, political memes stimulate online political participation.

The analysis of the results of the two coding frames confirms that political memes stimulate online political participation. First of all, the results of the in-depth analysis showed that all memes contained a clear political message. Moreover, the analysis of the results from the general coding frame showed that all the political memes during the 2016 election were created by using some form of originality. This entails that even when already existing meme formats or templates were used, the form and/or content of the memes was changed in order to express the personal political opinions of the memes. In addition, the general coding analysis showed that the propagation of political memes was frequent during the entire 2016 election and that most memes were spread via social media platforms (81%). This allowed the majority of the memes to reach many people and influence the public political debate. Finally, the general coding analysis revealed that the memes did not contain many film, music, and TV show popular culture references, but they did contain popular political opinions. These were sufficient to make the majority of the memes resonate with large groups of the U.S. citizens.

This shows the increasing interlinking of the political and the popular in the U.S. during the 2016 election.

H3: *The majority of the political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election featured Trump.*

Hypothesis three was proven to be correct. As already argued by Heiskanen (2017) in the literature review, Trump's lack of political experience and his status as a celebrity candidate made him a popular subject for meme-makers. This is confirmed by the coding of visibility in the general coding frame, which showed that Trump was the most visible presidential candidate (51,4%) in the memes. Clinton (29%) and the other presidential candidates (28,3%) were less visible than Trump throughout both time periods. Importantly, this data proves that a significant number of the political memes during the 2016 election had the potential to influence Trump's position.

H4: *The purpose of political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election was to support the preferred candidate.*

Hypothesis four was proven to be incorrect. The analysis of the coding of the goal of the memes showed that only a small portion of the memes had as its goal to support a presidential candidate (10%). This is not a surprising outcome when looking at some of the other results of the coding frames. Overall, the majority of the memes were coded in the general coding frame to express negative sentiments (46,4%) and in the in-depth coding frame to express negative messages (52,5%). Only a small portion of the memes expressed a positive sentiment (10,9%) and/or a positive message (10%). Thus, despite that some memes were used to support the preferred candidate, these percentages are not strong enough to prove this hypothesis. On the basis of this data, it can be concluded that only a small part of the political memes was used to support the preferred candidate. However, since the data is based on a sample, it is not possible to conclude that this was the case for all political memes during the 2016 election. Meaning that it is possible that more than 10% of all the memes during the 2016 election was used to support the preferred candidate.

H5: *The purpose of political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election was to delegitimize the opponent candidate.*

Hypothesis five was proven to be correct. As was already argued by Heiskanen (2017) and Ross & Rivers (2017) in the literature review, political memes were used during the 2016 election to

delegitimize the opponent presidential candidates. Indeed, the coding of the goal of the memes showed that the goal of the majority of the memes was to delegitimize one of the candidates (77,5%), and specifically to delegitimize Trump (45%). However, the number of memes that had as their goal to delegitimize Trump or to delegitimize Clinton both increased in the general election period (respectively +5% and +25%). This suggests that the desire to use memes to delegitimize the presidential candidates increased in the general election period. This makes sense because the majority of the memes expressed a negative sentiment and/or negative message. Negativity and delegitimization seemed to have gone hand in hand. In addition, as discussed in the literature review the 2016 election was often described as a choice between “the lesser of two evils”, meaning that many people did not want either of the candidates as their president. Thus, the majority of the political memes in the meme sample were indeed used to delegitimize the opponent candidate. However, in the spirit of choosing between the lesser of two evils, a number of memes wanted to delegitimize both candidates, meaning that both candidates were seen as the opponent candidate. Importantly, on the basis of this data it can be concluded that the majority of the political memes during the 2016 election were used to delegitimize the opponent candidate, and that some memes were used to delegitimize both candidates. But it cannot be concluded that all memes during the 2016 election had as their goal to delegitimize the opponent candidate. Therefore, it is possible that some of the political memes during the 2016 election were used for other purposes.

H6: *The political memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election lowered the threshold to participate in politics.*

Hypothesis six was proven to be correct. As already argued by Shifman (2014) in the literature review, online political participation includes more ordinary political practices, like posting jokes about politicians on social media. This suggests that online political participation has made it easier to participate in politics. As already discussed under hypothesis two, political memes are a form of online political participation. The analysis of the results of the two coding frames has shown that political memes are a simple and easy means to participate in politics online. All the political memes were created using repackaging techniques, which entails that they were largely based on already existing meme formats and templates. Moreover, the majority of the political memes was simple (95%), meaning that they consisted of three meme layers or less. Hence, though they required time and commitment, making political memes was still an entry level political activity. Once made, it was easy to spread the political memes via social media. Thus, this data proves that the majority of the political memes during the 2016

election were rather easy to make and to spread. This suggests that the majority of the political memes had the potential to lower the threshold to participate in politics during the 2016 election.

H1: *The creation and propagation of the messages of political memes affected Donald Trump's position during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.*

On basis of the discussions about hypotheses two till six, the main hypothesis can now also be tested and discussed. Hypothesis one was proven to be correct. As already discussed under hypothesis H2, the originality of the political memes during the 2016 election showed that they were indeed used to express personal political opinions and/or preferences and to influence political outcomes. In addition, the statistics coding of popularity uncovered that most of the memes enjoyed at least some popularity (78%). Thus, their political messages reached significant amounts of people which only increased their ability to influence political outcomes.

Moreover, the analysis of the general content coding showed that the majority of the political memes focused on the individual presidential candidates (78,3%), meaning that the memes were thus able to influence the individual positions of the candidates in the 2016 election. The in-depth content coding of party affiliation confirmed this as only 19% of the memes were about a political party and 81% about an individual candidate. Specifically, Trump was the most visible candidate (51,4%), meaning he was the candidate that generated most interest and attention. In addition, Trump's visibility in the memes remained rather constant in both time periods (53,6% and 49,3%). This implies that the interest in and attention for Trump remained rather constant during the entire 2016 election period, even when he was not yet one of the main contenders for the presidency. Likewise, Trump was the candidate about who the most memes expressed a sentiment (57,2%). Furthermore, due to the simplicity of the memes, their U.S. specific political content, and the increased interlinking of the political and popular spheres in the U.S., many U.S. citizens could resonate with the majority of the political memes. Finally, the in-depth content coding revealed that more than half of the political memes contained a political message about Trump (57,5%) and the majority of the memes had as their goal to support, critique or delegitimize Trump (60%). Again, this shows that Trump was a preferred topic for a significant amount of the political memes during the 2016 election. Consequently, a significant number of the messages of the political memes had the possibility to affect Trump's position throughout the 2016 election.

6.1.1. Results of the hypotheses testing

The testing of the hypotheses has generated some important findings and insights which will be summarized here. First of all, as explained earlier in this thesis, on the basis of the data no absolute claims about the effects of political memes can be made. Therefore, conclusions were drawn about the potential of the memes to influence Trump's position.

The testing of hypothesis H2 revealed that political memes stimulated political participation in the U.S. because they triggered an increase in online political participation. The political memes that were propagated during the 2016 election spread popular political opinions. As a result, the popular and political were interlinked and the majority of the memes had the potential to resonate with large groups of the U.S. citizens. In addition, the testing of hypothesis H3 showed that the majority of the political memes during the 2016 election featured Trump. Consequently, a significant number of the political memes during the 2016 election had the potential to influence Trump's position.

Moreover, the testing of hypothesis H4 uncovered that only a small part of the political memes during the 2016 election had as its purpose to support the preferred candidate. Also, the testing of hypothesis H5 revealed that the purpose of the majority of the political memes during the 2016 election was to delegitimize the opponent candidate, and some of the political memes were used to delegitimize both candidates. This indicates that the feeling of choosing between the lesser of two evils was also present in some of the political memes. However, it could not be proven that it was the purpose of all memes to delegitimize the opponent candidate.

Taken together, the findings of hypotheses H4 and H5 show that the political memes during the 2016 election did not have one purpose. Instead, they were used to both support the preferred candidate and to delegitimize the opponent candidate. Importantly, some of the political memes were used to delegitimize not just the opponent candidate, but also other candidates. Furthermore, the testing of hypothesis H6 showed that the majority of the political memes during the 2016 election had the potential to lower the threshold to participate in politics. This is because the majority of the political memes were rather easy to create and spread.

Finally, by combining the findings and insights from hypotheses H2 till H6, hypothesis H1 could be tested. The testing of hypothesis H1 revealed that the creation and propagation of a significant number of the political memes had the potential to affect Trump's position during the 2016 election. By lowering the threshold to participate in politics political memes became an easy form of political participation. In addition, the popular political content of the memes and their simplicity led to an interlinking of the popular and political in the U.S. during the 2016 election. Combined with the increase in online political participation, this gave the

political memes the potential to influence politics during the 2016 election. The high visibility of Trump and sentiments about Trump in the majority of the political memes shows that Trump was the preferred topic for a significant part of the memes. This indicates that a significant number of the memes had the potential to influence Trump's position during the 2016 election.

6.2. Limitations

It is important to mention the limitations of this research. This research has three main limitations. First of all, as has already been explained throughout the thesis, the research was limited by the fact that it was based on a meme sample. Despite that this sample was selected to be as reflective as possible of the political memes that were propagated during the 2016 election, it is still possible that a degree of selection bias occurred. Therefore, it was not possible to draw absolute conclusions about all of the memes which were propagated during the 2016 election. However, conclusions could be drawn about the potential of the political memes to influence Trump's position.

Secondly, since this thesis conducted a single case study research, it may be questioned to what degree the results from this research can be generalized towards other countries, people, and circumstances. Indeed, the results of this thesis are about the effect of political memes on Trump's position during the 2016 election. Nevertheless, it is still possible to generalize about the effects of political memes by using the coding themes and coding categories in the coding book. These can be applied to other relevant cases in different countries where there are different circumstances and actors involved.

Finally, the field of memetics is a young academic field and it has to deal with intense academic debates. Consequently, there is a lack of theory about political memes. This lack of theory was compensated for by a rich and diverse literature review based on a significant amount of relevant secondary literature about political memes research. In addition, this thesis tried to contribute to political meme theory with the creation of the coding book which functions as a framework for political meme analysis. The coding themes and coding categories used in the coding book, with some case-specific changes relating to the actors and circumstances involved, can be used to research the effects of political memes on the position of politicians in other countries.

6.3. Possible avenues for future research

The coding book needs to be successfully applied to other cases. This is necessary in order to validate this research and to check whether the coding book is indeed a useful contribution to

political meme theory and the field of memetics. The statistics coding and form coding categories form a suitable basis as they are for future research into the possible effects of political memes. The content coding and in-depth content coding categories will need to be slightly changed in order to match the case-specific circumstances and actors.

An interesting case for future research is the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The 2020 election is already attracting much online attention and it will likely also become a meme election. On knowyourmeme.com there are already pages dedicated to the 2020 election and the 2020 primaries. In addition, Trump is running for re-election, which allows for a comparison of his role in the political memes and of the effect of the memes on his position during the 2020 election. Moreover, the 2020 Democratic primaries are likely to attract as much, if not more, meme attention as the 2016 Republican primaries. This is because already 23 Democratic candidates have declared their run to become the 2020 Democratic presidential candidate, making it an even larger primaries pool than the 2016 Republican primaries pool. Both a single case study research into the 2020 election and a comparative case study research into the 2016 election and 2020 election are possible avenues for future research.

Another interesting case for future research is the 2016 UK Brexit referendum. This case was already discussed as a possible alternative case study in the method chapter of this thesis. For reasons already explained, the Brexit referendum was not chosen as the case study of this thesis and it also did not provide a good case for a comparative case study research. However, that does not mean that it is not interesting to study the possible effect of political memes during the Brexit referendum. It is specifically interesting to study this case as a single case study in order to test whether the coding book is indeed suitable to research a different country, actors, and circumstances.

6.4. Conclusion

The discussion of hypothesis one has proven that the messages of political memes had the potential to significantly influence the position of Trump during the 2016 election. The main question can now also be answered: “*How did the messages spread by political memes affect Donald Trump’s position during the 2016 U.S. presidential election?*”

First of all, the general content coding showed that the political memes during the 2016 election were overall negative about the individual presidential candidates. However, the memes were more negative about Clinton than about Trump and the other presidential candidates. And while the memes became less negative about Trump in the general election period, they became more negative about Clinton in the same period. In addition, the memes

were overall more positive about Trump than about Clinton and the other presidential candidates. Also, the memes became slightly more positive about Trump in the general election period, while this remained the same for Clinton. Thus, these developments are likely to have strengthened Trump's position in relation to the other candidates' positions during the 2016 election.

Moreover, the in-depth content coding showed that the majority of the memes expressed a negative message, which increased their potential to undermine the individual positions of the presidential candidates. However, the majority of the messages was more negative about the other presidential candidates and Clinton than about Trump. Specifically, the messages were becoming less negative about Trump and more negative about Clinton in the general election period. In addition, the messages were more positive about Trump than about Clinton and the other candidates. Also, the messages became slightly more positive about Trump in the general election period. Thus, these developments are likely to have strengthened Trump's position in relation to the other candidates' positions during the 2016 election.

Furthermore, the coding of the goals of the memes showed that the goal of the majority of the memes was to delegitimize the presidential candidates and specifically to delegitimize Trump. And almost no memes were used to support a presidential candidate. Nevertheless, the number of memes that had as their goal to delegitimize Trump or to delegitimize Clinton both increased in the general election period. This suggests that the desire to use memes to delegitimize the presidential candidates increased in the general election period. These negative and delegitimizing memes had the potential to weaken the position of Trump during the 2016 election. However, the coding of humour showed that the majority of the memes used fun and simple jokes as a delegitimization strategy. This entails that the candidates are made fun of in order to delegitimize them. At the same time, inappropriate humour which is linked to deliberately fabricated fake news played almost no role. Importantly, jokes are a much softer delegitimization strategy than inappropriate humour and fake news. Thus, though the delegitimizing effect of jokes cannot be underestimated, it must be taken into consideration that this effect might not be as strong as other delegitimization strategies.

Ultimately, taken all of the above-mentioned political, social, and cultural effects on Trump's position together, the messages spread by political memes during the 2016 election are likely to have strengthened Trump's position in relation to the other presidential candidates.

7. Bibliography

Abbot, M., & McKinney, J. (2013). *Understanding and applying research design*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley. Retrieved December 15, 2018, from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443>.

Alexander, L. (2016, May 4). Blame it on the zodiac killer: Did social media ruin Ted Cruz's campaign? *The Guardian*. Retrieved May 22, 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/may/04/ted-cruz-campaign-social-media-memes-zodiac-killer>.

Babbie, E. (2013, 13 ed.). *The practice of social research*. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.

Ball, J. (2017). *Post-truth: How bullshit conquered the world*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Barkun, M. (2017). President Trump and the "fringe". *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29(3), 437-443. Retrieved May 10, 2019, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1313649>.

Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Desai, S., Mooney, H., & Oehrli, J.A. (2018, December 20). "Fake news," lies and propaganda: How to sort fact from fiction. *University of Michigan Library Research Guides*. Retrieved from: <https://guides.lib.umich.edu/fakenews>.

Francia, P. L. (2017). Free media and twitter in the 2016 presidential election: The unconventional campaign of Donald Trump. *Social Science Computer Review*, 36(4), 440-455. Retrieved November 16, 2018, from <https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/10.1177/0894439317730302>.

Gerring, J. (2004). What is a case study and what is it good for? *American Political Science Review*, 98(2), 341-354. Retrieved, December 10, 2018, from <https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/10.1017/S0003055404001182>.

Goertz, G., & Mahoney, J. (2012). *A tale of two cultures: Qualitative and quantitative research in social sciences*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. Retrieved December 15, 2018,

from

<https://login.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/login?URL=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=475403&site=ehost-live>.

Haddow, D. (November 4, 2016). Meme warfare: How the power of mass replication has poisoned the US election. *The Guardian*. US Elections 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/04/political-memes-2016-election-hillary-clinton-donald-trump>.

Heikkilä, N. (2017). Online antagonism of the alt-right in the 2016 election. Meme-ing electoral participation. *European Journal of American studies*, 12(2), 1-26. Retrieved November 17, 2018, from <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12140>.

Hamilton, L.J. (2016). World politics 2.0: An introduction. In L.J. Shepherd, L. & C. Hamilton (Ed.), *Understanding popular culture and world politics in the digital age* (pp.3-13). New York, NY: Routledge.

Heiskanen, B. (2017). Meme-ing electoral participation. *European Journal of American studies*, 12(2), 1-26. Retrieved November 17, 2018, from <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12158>.

Heiskanen, B. & Butters, A.M. (2017). Popularizing electoral politics: Change in the 2016 U.S. presidential race. *European Journal of American Studies*, 12(2), 1-9. Retrieved February 22, 2019 from <http://ejas.revues.org/12111>.

Heylighen, F. & Chielens, K. (2009). Cultural evolution and memetics. In R.A. Meyers (Ed.), *The encyclopaedia of complexity and system science*. (pp. 3205-3320). Brussels: Springer. Retrieved November 18, 2018, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238712742_Cultural_Evolution_and_Memetics_Article_prepared_for_the_Encyclopedia_of_Complexity_and_System_Science.

Hoax. (n.d.). In *Merriam Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hoax>.

Hsieh, H., & Shannon, S. (2018). Content Analysis. In B. Frey (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopedia of educational research, measurement, and evaluation* (pp. 392-394). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. Retrieved December 18, 2018, from https://catalogue.leidenuniv.nl/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_gvrl_refCX7423300147&context=PC&vid=UBL_V1&search_scope=All_Content&tab=all_content&lang=en_US.

Irony. (n.d.). In *Merriam Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/irony>.

Joke. (n.d.). In *Merriam Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/joke>.

Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2007). Online memes, affinities, and cultural production. In M. Knobel & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *A New Literacies Sampler* (pp.199-227). New York: Peter Lang Publishing. Retrieved February 18, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283968435_Online_memes_affinities_and_cultural_production.

Know Your Meme. (2016, February 22). 2016 United States presidential election. *Know Your Meme*. Retrieved from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/2016-united-states-presidential-election>.

Know Your Meme. (2013, March 1). Donald Trump. *Know Your Meme*. Retrieved from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/donald-trump#2016>.

Know Your Meme. (2014, January 29). Hillary Clinton. *Know Your Meme*. Retrieved from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/hillary-clinton>.

Know Your Meme. (2012, February 29). Image Macros. *Know Your Meme*. Retrieved from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros>.

Know Your Meme. (2015, June 25). 2016 Republican presidential primary. *Know Your Meme*. Retrieved from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/2016-republican-presidential-primary>.

Lister, M. & Pia, E. (2008). *Citizenship in contemporary Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Available from DOI:10.3366/edinburgh/9780748633418.001.0001.

Milner, R.M. (2016). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. Available from https://catalogue.leidenuniv.nl/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=UBL_ALMA51282659550002711&context=L&vid=UBL_V1&search_scope=All_Content&tab=all_content&lang=en_US.

Morse, J.M. (2011). Purposive Sampling. In M. S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. Futing Liao (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of social science research methods* (p.885). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. Retrieved, December 15, 2018, from, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589>.

Orlikowski, J.W., & Yates, J. (1994). Genre repertoire: The structuring of communicative practices in organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39(4), 541-574. Retrieved April 10, 2019, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2393771>.

Peters, Y. (2017). *Political participation, diffused governance, and the transformation of democracy: Patterns of change*. London: Routledge, imprint of Taylor & Francis group. Available from <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315294483>.

Ross, A. S., & Rivers, D. J. (2017). Digital cultures of political participation: Internet memes and the discursive delegitimization of the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates. *Discourse, Context and Media*, 16, 1-11. Retrieved November 16, 2018, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.01.001>.

Sarcasm. (n.d.). In *Merriam Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sarcasm>.

Satire. (n.d.). In *Merriam Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/satire>.

Schreier, M. (2013). Qualitative content analysis. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp.170-183). London: SAGE Publications Ltd. Retrieved April 15, 2019, from <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>.

Seawright, J., & Gerring, J. (2008). Case selection techniques in case study research: A menu of qualitative and quantitative options. *Political Research Quarterly*, *61*(2), 294-308. Retrieved December 14, 2018, from <https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/10.1177/1065912907313077>.

Sentiment. (n.d.). In *Merriam Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sentiment>.

Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. Available from <https://login.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/login?URL=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=649171&site=ehost-live>.

Time Staff. (2015, June 16). Here's Donald Trump's presidential announcement speech. *Time*. Retrieved November 16, 2018, from <http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

Urban Dictionary. (2012, June 14). In *Urban Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Memeable>.

Wattal, S., Schuff, D., Mandviwalla, M., & Williams, C.B. (December 2010). Web 2.0 and politics: The 2008 US presidential election and an e-politics research agenda. *MIS Quarterly*, *34*(4), 669-688. Retrieved February 18, 2019, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25750700>.

Yao, S. (2016). Pocket-sized politics: binders, big bird and other memes of the 2012 US presidential campaign. In L.J. Shepherd & C. Hamilton (Ed.), *Understanding popular culture and world politics in the digital age* (pp. 153-174). New York, NY: Routledge.

Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Youth voting. *CIRCLE*. Retrieved from <https://civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/>.