

SPREADABLE MEDIA, CITIZENS, AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE:
USES AND EFFECTS OF POLITICAL INTERNET MEMES

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Abstract

Internet memes, or “artifacts of participatory digital culture” (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 6), are increasingly visible in political contexts around the world. Appearing in social movements, political campaigns, and everyday discourse, Internet memes are believed to be a tool for people to communicate their personal-political opinions, values, and experiences in a digital public sphere. A study was undertaken to learn more about Internet meme users, by exploring the uses for Internet memes and the effects of Internet meme use in political settings. Drawing on concepts and empirical findings from the fields of memetics, communication science, and political participation research, this project approached Internet memes from a media-psychological perspective. Across three studies, this dissertation presents an exploration of the political relevance of Internet meme use. The first study dealt with the central motives for using Internet memes, and the role that users attribute to political Internet memes. In a Delphi-method interview study with meme experts ($n=9$) and regular meme users ($n=16$), participants discussed why they turned to Internet memes. A qualitative content analysis revealed that political meme use is driven by an interplay of self-expression, social identity, and entertainment motives. Participants also concluded that the use of political Internet memes can supplement, but not replace, other political activities. To focus on the political attitudes and behaviors of meme users, the second study used an online survey ($N=333$) to assess the antecedents and consequences of political Internet meme use. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that the use of political Internet memes can be significantly predicted by political interest and by political meme efficacy, or the belief that memes are an efficacious political activity. Further, meme use significantly predicted higher engagement in conventional and unconventional political activities, even when controlling for

political interest. The third study was therefore aimed at uncovering mechanisms of possible mobilizing effects of political Internet meme use. In a controlled laboratory setting, participants ($N=104$) were randomly assigned into one of three conditions (meme consumption, private meme production, public meme production). Subsequent prosocial behavior tendencies (donating to a charity and signing up for a newsletter) were not found to differ across the conditions, although marginally significant interaction effects related to cost were found, along with a result related to a measure of selfish tendencies. Implications of the overall results and recommendations for future research are discussed.

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1 Introduction

When legislative elections were held across Russia on December 4, 2011, Vladimir Putin's United Russia party emerged victorious with 49.32% of votes and an absolute majority of seats. The following day, Moscow saw tens of thousands flooding the streets to protest against electoral fraud ("Russian protests biggest in years," 2011). Although Russian media reported the elections to have been in accordance with all rules and regulations, a number of amateur election monitors and journalists had uploaded videos documenting violations and irregularities, most notably of ballot boxes being stuffed with votes for United Russia. This led to approximately 12 million additional votes, with some regions recording over 140% voter turnout ("Political crisis in Russia," 2011). As this information surfaced, *140%* became Internet shorthand for the regime's electoral manipulation, resulting in a number of jokes and puns centered on this idea, such as "Putinka Russian Vodka, now with 140% alcohol" and "Durex: Putin it in your girlfriend is 140% safe" (see Appendix A for examples). Variations and plays on this theme were rapidly shared on several online platforms, together with more serious calls to action. The Russian networking site VKontakte, as well as Twitter and Facebook, were instrumental in coordinating and mobilizing the protests. Beyond Russia, Internet users grew aware of the electoral fraud and protest efforts through these posts on imageboards and online community sites. Although protests in Russia continued for several weeks, calls for the election to be re-run were ultimately unsuccessful and Putin later won the 2012 presidential election. The *140%* theme remained online for some time as a reference to the Russian electoral manipulation and general distrust toward the regime ("2011 Russian protests," 2018).

In May 2016, as Boris Johnson was touring Great Britain for the Leave campaign, he¹ remarked that it was “absolutely crazy” that the EU was dictating specifications for the shape of bananas (Henley, 2016). His comment alluded to a popular euromyth: with Commission Regulation (EC) No. 2257/94 laying down quality standards for bananas, the European Union had allegedly imposed a ban on curvy bananas. For years, this misconception circulated online, where Twitter and Facebook users shared slogans such as “Real bananas have curves,” “Bent bananas equals freedom,” or “No more straight bananas after Brexit” (see Appendix B for examples). Likewise, politicians and media outlets addressed the purported *straight banana ruling* as an example of needless and arbitrary European bureaucracy (Uhlig, 2002). As such, by 2016 this myth had become a well-known banner for Euroscepticism and was one of numerous tropes used by the Leave campaign to persuade voters. In June 2016, the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum took place, with 51.9% votes in favor of the UK leaving the EU; a year after the referendum, a poll found that half of all respondents found the Leave campaign to be mostly or completely misleading (Farand, 2017).

On October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano wrote a tweet, encouraging all those who had been sexually assaulted or harassed to reply with “me too.” Within a day, the phrase had been used more than 500,000 times (Seales, 2018). During the course of the following weeks, Twitter and Facebook users worldwide shared their experiences and joined in the conversation, including a plethora of public figures (see Appendix C for examples). #MeToo

¹ Note that this dissertation aims to use bias-free language throughout. When authors or participants are directly quoted, the pronouns *he* or *she* are used. When anonymously referring to a participant, *he* or *she* is replaced by the singular *they*. The rest of the text uses the first person singular or the editorial *we*. This varies only in the three studies presented, in that the choice of *we* or *I* in Chapters 6–8 reflects authorship.

trended in at least 85 other countries, with many regions adding local hashtags (e.g., #balanceTonPorc in France, en: expose your pig). Soon, the initial prompt—to illustrate the magnitude of sexual assault and harassment—widened to include other sub-themes, such as the sexually exploitative environment of the entertainment industry, spousal abuse, and sexual harassment at the workplace. With localized accents, the #MeToo hashtag catalyzed and encouraged a global discussion on the issues surrounding rape, consent, and sexual harassment (Czarnecki, 2018). On November 29, 2017, the United States House of Representatives passed the ME TOO Congress Act, a bill dedicated to facilitating sexual harassment complaints filed against members of the legislative branch of the United States. Although other countries did not take measures this targeted, the #MeToo movement has been credited for raising awareness around the world (Burke, 2018).

The previous cases are just three examples that show political Internet memes at work. A meme, or a unit of culture, can take many forms: the *140%* joke expressing Russians' distrust, the *bendy banana law* serving as a narrative of Brexiteers, or #MeToo eliciting an intensely public conversation. In each of these cases, an Internet meme encroached on a socio-political sphere and demonstrated a reach far beyond the online communities in which it originated or first spread. Whether any of these Internet memes individually played a role in changing history, we cannot determine². Yet, the fact that these memes served one of three political functions—(1) as forms of persuasion or political advocacy, (2) as grassroots action, or (3) as modes of expression and public discussion (Shifman, 2014, pp. 122)—show that they are today a relevant element of our political landscape.

² Although preliminary results indicate that the #MeToo movement may in fact have produced lasting social change (Ohlheiser, 2018).

The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to address memetic content as a moderating link between individuals and political life. I approach the topic by looking at what makes up an Internet meme and review memes' relationship to the political realm. This is followed by an overview of entertainment media and politics. Due to the lack of research on memes from a user-centered perspective, I draw on related fields that have been accorded more thorough consideration. Hence, we examine the rise of infotainment and discuss the effects of political entertainment television programs. From there, we explore the diversification of political participation, including the rise of online political participation and their impact on the political sphere. With a focus on online activities, I entertain the notions that social media either siphon political interest away from meaningful forms of engagement or positively contribute to the mobilization of citizens. Empirically, this thesis then explores motives for individuals to use political Internet memes to understand whether users turn to memes with the express intent of acting in a political manner. This is followed by a quantitative exploration of the political behavior patterns of Internet meme users. The last study tests the mobilizing effect of using political Internet memes in an experimental setting. Taken together, this work sheds light on today's appeal, function, and impact of Internet memes in political contexts.

2 Internet memes

This chapter introduces us to the original field of memetics and definition of a meme. It explains how memes are related to virals, traces the conceptualization of memes as they meet the Internet, and reviews contemporary research on Internet memes. With a focus on the role of Internet memes in political contexts, we review findings on memes in social movements, in political and grassroots campaigns, as tools for subversion in authoritarian regimes, and in the regular practices of everyday social media use. We end with a working definition of Internet memes as spreadable media that have been replicated and amended by numerous users on the Internet.

2.1 Memes, memetics, and virals

The term *meme* was coined by Richard Dawkins, who in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* defined it as a unit of cultural transmission. This unit can be anything from as simple as an expression, joke, mannerism, recipe, or catchphrase to as complex and abstract as an idea, ideology, or faith. Dawkins (1976) suggested that the entirety of human culture is composed of memes, of cultural artifacts that are passed between members of a population. Using *mimesis*, or imitation, these elements are replicated by each individual, allowing for alteration and evolution. The analogy Dawkins drew was of the meme as the societal equivalent of the gene, undergoing the same processes of variation, competition, selection, and retention with which genes are associated. The title of Dawkins' book referred to a gene's necessity to spread, selfishly self-propagating for success. His book proposed the same mechanism holds true for memes, fighting for survival by attempting to gain more attention from their hosts than rival memes, lest they become extinct.

This notion that cultural elements behave like their biological parallels to spread and survive eventually received widespread attention in academic communities. Susan Blackmore's 1999 book *The Meme Machine* extended Dawkins' work on the biological analogies of memes. In it, she argues that imitation is an innately human trait, unlike animal behavior, which is instinctual, learned, or conditioned. Our capacity for imitation means we are at all times possessed by a multitude of memes, which through us make up and shape the whole of human culture. Blackmore proposed that we can understand the way cultural systems evolve by applying the general evolutionary theory's concepts of replicators (=memes) and vehicles (=humans). Her idea was that we unknowingly become infected with memes, allowing them to spread throughout populations without being specifically selected. Rather, certain memes possess evolutionary advantages that make their spread and replication more likely. For example, Blackmore likens altruism to a meme and argues that because altruistic individuals are more likable and possess more social ties, altruism as a meme can be spread more easily than selfish behavior (Blackmore, 1999, pp. 154–155). This perspective of us humans as meme machines—as memes' vessels for cultural evolution—radically called into question the idea of human free will and autonomy.

The original biological perspective on memes is the most iconic and remained popular for many years, yet not all characteristics of genes are smoothly transferable to the concept of memes. For one, genes are only transmitted vertically—between generations—whereas memes can also be transmitted horizontally—within generations—and in these diffusion patterns show more similarities to infections or viruses than to genes (Cullen, 1999)³.

³ The notion of exclusively vertical gene transfer is challenged by the field of epigenetics, which argues that organisms can also acquire environmental information that can horizontally transfer to genes (see also McDaniel et al., 2010; Soucy, Houang, & Gogarten, 2015).

However, one of the largest controversies that arose from the meme-gene comparison was that individuals transmitting memes were characterized as hosts, as passive agents infected by a meme rather than active agents who can consciously decide which cultural artifacts to retain and spread. In light of this perspective, early research on memes failed to take into account individuals' social norms, experiences, and preferences as relevant predictors of a memetic selection process. Thus, this initial approach to memetics quieted down in the early 21st century, yet the idea that information spreads by way of infection once more took the limelight with the appearance of viral Internet phenomena (Goel, Anderson, Hofman, & Watts, 2015; Sampson, 2012). Virality-focused research is less concerned with the meta-mechanics of how culture is created and more interested in understanding which characteristics of a piece of information will determine its transmission. Before we examine this strand of research, let us first define the concept of a viral, especially in relation to a meme.

The dividing line between memetic and viral content is vague; virals are for good reason considered “the closest neighbor of the meme concept in both popular and academic discourse” (Shifman, 2014, p. 55). The two can, however, be thought of as separate concepts: a viral is an item that is spread from person to person via social media platforms, where it achieves broad reach at great speed (Hemsley & Mason, 2013). Unlike a meme, a viral is a stand-alone cultural artifact that rapidly reaches popularity and then ebbs away. A meme, according to its original definition, is a *collection of artifacts* that together stand for an idea or concept; the meme itself can be thought of as the underlying message transmitted through a population via its textual variations (see Shifman, 2014, p. 56). For example, if we look at a recipe, the memetic variations are all the instances the recipe has been cooked by different

people throughout time and space, subjected to both individual preferences and culture-specific modifications. A meme must therefore encompass predecessors and successors—variants, remixes, and alterations of its initial trigger—whereas the viral is a singular cultural element with a one shot at popularity. To further complicate matters, a meme may well be considered viral when having infected a population but not every viral is a meme. A prime example of a viral Internet phenomenon is *Kony 2012*, a documentary film by the organization Invisible Children that reached over half of young US-Americans within a few days of its publication, primarily by spreading through social media platforms (boyd, 2012; Rainie, Hitlin, Jurkowitz, Dimock, & Neidorf, 2012). Most likely, the Internet produced some variations of the *Kony 2012* theme, yet by far the most popular artifact remains the initial video, which can therefore be classified as viral but not memetic.

Virals such as *Kony 2012* beg the question why some topics rise to instantaneous fame whereas others do not. To answer, virality-focused research explores factors of popularity and dynamics of digital information diffusion (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009). First, these studies examine content characteristics as criteria that enhance popularity: valence, the propensity for physiological arousal, or memorability of the media content (Berger & Milkman, 2013; Khosla, Sarma, & Hamid, 2014; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Second, they consider social factors related to source traits, such as the perceived proximity between sender and recipient (Dubois, Bonezzi, & De Angelis, 2016). Finally, they study power structures and communication patterns of networks. For example, influencer nodes are believed to be particularly effective at reaching large audiences (Gomez-Rodriguez, Leskovec, & Krause, 2011) but peripheral participants can also significantly increase the reach of a message (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015).

Both the early field of memetics and the contemporary study of information diffusion focus on the story from a particular angle and each come with a blind spot. By conceptualizing humans as hosts, early meme research ignores individuals' motives for engaging with memetic content. The study of information diffusion, by focusing on virality in terms of message effectiveness and transmission patterns, does not address the societal implications of content that reaches cult status. Since Internet memes have moved into the public eye and sparked debate on their role in political contexts, a modern field of memetics that addresses these gaps has been taking shape. As Cappella (2002) writes, "Under the 'media as meme' theory, research changes focus. Research agendas about media effects broaden to questions about the replication of stories, whether those stories are reproduced in other media and established news outlets or whether the stories also find expression in popular culture, social interaction, electronic exchange, or entertainment" (p.238). This still holds true today: contemporary memeticists focus on the reproduction and spread of memetic media elements while also considering human agency as quintessential in these processes. With this new approach comes a re-evaluation of the meme concept taking into account the rapid transmission of online content. Dawkins (Solon, 2013) himself believes that deliberate alteration and conscious content transmission with the aim of reaching large audiences substantially differentiates Internet memes from his original concept of a meme. The visibility of social media behaviors, along with the high reactivity of online platforms, feedback loops, social rewards, and the gamification elements that are built into the architecture of social media sites, create an environment in which the spreading of content is explicitly encouraged. Moreover, the term *Internet meme* has been appropriated by online communities and, in

colloquial use, typically refers to individual memetic artifacts rather than the abstract cultural unit behind a collection of artifacts.

To circumvent the term's ambiguity and provide a working definition of Internet memes, we turn to the work of Wiggins and Bowers. The authors define memes as “artifacts of participatory digital culture” (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 6) because the production, consumption, and reproduction characteristics of memes imply that users who engage with them do so in order to participate in an ongoing conversation. Using memes—or participating in digital culture—means users are constantly renegotiating the world around them by engaging with the cultural elements that constitute the social world. The fluidity of this memetic process is illustrated by the authors' classification of the genre of Internet memes into three categories: spreadable media, emergent memes, and memes. Spreadable media are media messages in their raw state, before having undergone any sort of alteration. A Tweet, a still image from a film, or a video uploaded on YouTube function as conversation starters—pieces of media that can potentially be spread. Not all spreadable media belong to the genre of Internet memes: media that are not spread will neither have entered into the minds of people, nor possess any social influence. However, once spreadable media are altered, remixed, or parodied, they become an emergent meme. The authors take care to include subversive, countercultural, and socially critical content in this category because such messages tend to use well-known symbols, logos, or slogans and repurpose them with critical perspectives⁴. Finally, emergent memes that produce further iterations to the point of fully permeating a

⁴ For instance, in 2012, Greenpeace and the Yes Men created a mock advertisement campaign against the Shell Corporation, which included a website called Arctic Ready, built to look like Shell's and comprised of a meme-generator that enabled users to create spoof Shell advertisements (John, 2013; Levy, 2012).

population can be considered memes in the original sense of the word (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Where the line between each of these categories is drawn remains a matter of negotiation and context. Yet, the fact that a considerable portion of online content can be classified into the genre of Internet memes shines a new light on media and communication studies. To understand the political implications of participating in digitally networked discourse, we do not need a strict demarcation between emergent meme and meme, as long as the content in question is spreadable and belongs to the repertoire of online media with which numerous users are engaging. We thus define an Internet meme as a digital media artifact belonging to a culturally negotiated conversation between members of a population.

2.2 Internet memes and politics

Much of contemporary political Internet meme research is rooted in communication science and examines memes as forms of political expression, participation, and commentary—particularly for those unable or unwilling to participate in formal politics such as voting (Shifman, 2014, p. 120). Such studies typically focus on understanding how online political dialogue differs from traditional political dialogue by news media outlets and political elites.

Content analyses like the work of Ross and Rivers (2017) capture discursive strategies in individual case studies of political Internet memes. Specifically, the authors identify online narratives during the 2016 Trump versus Clinton presidential campaign. They find that meme creators convey their ideological stance through memes in the hopes of influencing others and bringing about desired political results. They conclude that such low-barrier access allows virtually all citizens to engage with politics. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) likewise provide insight into meme-based political discourse by examining formal and content-related

characteristics of an Internet meme on LGBTQ rights. They find that the memes, although hypothetically ideal for subversion, in this case tend to gravitate toward cohesiveness, portraying central themes, social norms, and collective identities while also adhering to the formal elements of the initial media artifact. The authors deduce that despite the absence of traditional gatekeeping mechanisms of institutionalized news organizations, the memetic discourse in its conformity excludes those who do not follow the central tenets of its content, form, or stance, ultimately producing more hegemonic patterns than traditional media (Gal et al., 2016). By contrast, Freelon and Karpf (2015) observe that during political spectacles such as the 2008 debates of candidates Obama and Romney, political online participation increases the influence of non-political elites. The authors also point out the role of humor in memetic online expression, which they observe is applied to make substantive political arguments and delegitimize opposing candidates (Freelon & Karpf, 2015). Overall, their study shows that diverse online commentators, including ordinary citizens, comedians, non-political celebrities, and artists, broaden the conversation by constructing different media narratives. The power of Internet memes to create an alternative political conversation is also a central finding of Milner's (2013b) study of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests. He writes that image memes can "agilely respond to diverse public events" (Milner, 2013b, p. 2359) because they are quickly produced and spread. Combining elements of popular culture with political commentary, political Internet memes enable those familiar with the vernacular of memetic practices to contribute political or personal perspectives to the public sphere. Overall, these studies conclude that Internet memes provide users with the opportunity to effortlessly engage in political discourses in times of political campaigns, social movements, and public debates.

In addition to the ever growing body of research on Internet memes' role in democracies, there are also a handful of scholars who study memes as tools for dissent and subversion in authoritarian regimes. Most notable is the case of China, where—under the guise of building a *harmonious society*—the state introduced numerous policies to monitor, control, and censor the Internet in 2000. Online bloggers resisting these harmonization efforts began using *harmony* as a synonym of state censorship and spoke out against “being harmonized” (Rea, 2013). In turn, the government flagged the term as sensitive and began policing it as well. In response, activists slightly changed the intonation on the original Chinese word *harmony* to produce the term *river crab*, which was then widely adopted as an icon for free speech and against Internet censorship. The Chinese Internet meme *grass mud horse* came about in a likewise fashion, created in 2008 in response to alleged government bans on pornographic content. In its alternative intonation, it literally means “fuck your mother” (Lugg, 2013). *Grass mud horse* and *river crab* have since spawned countless multimodal variations, with songs, videos, and storylines revolving around these cult-status creatures, creating a “genre of protest and contention through which the process of state policing is sabotaged and challenged” (Wang, Juffermanns, & Du, 2016, p. 315). These Internet memes contain humor to attract people to contentious political topics, protect creators from sanctions by veiling direct criticisms, and create a feeling of unity in light of powerful government sanctions.

Finally, we come to the category of political Internet memes that exist outside of political campaign efforts, grassroots activities, and protest endeavors. These Internet memes, which we will call everyday memes, have received the least scholarly attention, with most studies to date more concerned with tracing high-profile memetic case studies.

Understandably, influential political Internet memes viewed as catalysts for a social movement take precedence over everyday Internet memes, yet the latter should not be underestimated. In line with other forms of ritualized social media practices (see Couldry, 2004; Highfield, 2016b, p. 44), everyday memes are created within the web of popular culture, entertainment media, and identity politics, providing a steady stream of commentary on current events. As such, they may serve other purposes than those identified in research on overt and deliberate political meme use. For example, humor has been found to facilitate political engagement by providing easy and safe access to difficult-to-process topics (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & de Vrees, 2015). Internet memes generally are found to employ lighthearted humor to a wide range of topics. Highfield (2016b, p. 44) identifies meme use as a ritualized social media practice that can be adapted for political purposes but is not political in and of itself. Everyday Internet memes that exist at this intersection of entertainment and politics complicate our understanding of them and of the field of memetics in general.

Research that places emphasis on influential memes that reach larger-than-usual populations skews our understanding of Internet meme use as an overall mundane activity. On the other hand, treating all everyday memes as apolitical also bears the risk of unjustly dismissing them as frivolous and without influence. The question when and how Internet memes are political remains a matter of debate and further study.

We can summarize the current field as examining Internet memes in four contexts: (1) in political campaigns, (2) in social movements, (3) as tools for subversion, and (4) as ongoing commentary of everyday politics. Memes in democracies are thought to provide alternative political discourse and new forms of access for politically marginalized and underrepresented groups. They may moderate public conversations or mobilize citizens to

participate in social action. Memes in autocracies typically express criticism and display distrust in a regime but, in select cases, may also support connective action and regime change. Everyday memes as habitual social media use and existing at the fringe areas of politics prove to be the most difficult to grasp in terms of use and impact.

Missing from contemporary memetics research is the explicit study of individuals who engage with memes—meme users. Motives for meme use or the impact accorded to memes are, if at all considered, extrapolated from context rather than directly measured by studying meme users. This bias may stem from traditional memetics' focus on cultural units rather than cultural agents or the fact that contemporary memetics is more deeply rooted in media and communication science than in media-psychology. In any case, how individuals perceive and experience memes, why they use them, what they gain from doing so, and what societal or political importance they attribute to memes is often theorized (see Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) but rarely grounded in empirical data. Both the overall field of modern memetics and the focus of memes in the previously reviewed political contexts would benefit from an added perspective of meme users and their experiences of memes. Only then would we be able to gauge whether we should consider these activities relevant to the political realm.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented the original definition of memes as genes—a framework that characterizes memes as undergoing processes of evolutionary selection and competition to survive. It reviewed the modern concept of memes and virals before coming to a working definition of Internet memes as “artifacts of participatory digital culture” (Wiggins & Bowers,

2015). Lastly, this chapter reviewed research on political Internet memes that examine memes' appearance and role in political discourse, campaigns, and social movements, in authoritarian regimes, and in everyday social media practices.

In the tradition of veteran meme theory according to Dawkins (1976) and Blackmore (1990), I believe there is value in continuing the study of memes as an inherently cultural phenomenon. Memes' social embeddedness may influence users beyond their own cognizance, thus warranting further research on the political effects of memes. Despite these automatic mechanisms, Internet memes may also appear in political contexts for distinct and separate reasons. In other words, users have a multitude of purposes for deliberately choosing to engage with Internet memes; however, few studies have considered this perspective. I believe this research gap calls for a user-centered focus that gives consideration to meme users' motivations for and experiences with engaging with Internet memes in political contexts.

3 Politics, entertainment, and the media

Chapter 2 reviews how Internet memes function as spreadable media in today's converging societies. To illuminate this point from the political communication discipline, this chapter examines the nexus of politics, entertainment, and media and how these domains have come to overlap in today's mediated public sphere. It also illuminates how users turn to these media and how political user-generated content relates to user motivations to engage in the political realm.

First, we look at the historical frictions between politics and entertainment and the evolution of political entertainment media in print and television. We then turn to the emergence of the *Fifth Estate* through social media and locate user-generated content within the broader context of political entertainment media as part of an evolving media landscape. In the second section we review how users turn to political entertainment media and the ways in which political entertainment is thought to affect audiences, particularly in providing pathways to politics. Due to the scarcity of research on Internet meme uses and effects, the findings from late-night shows serve as a starting point in understanding possible effects of political humor and political entertainment media, which by way of similar mechanisms may also be relevant for the study of political Internet memes.

3.1 Political entertainment media

Political entertainment media—also called *soft news* (see Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2012), *infotainment* (see Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005), *politainment* (see Dörner, 2001), and *infoenterpropagainment* (Caufield, 2008)—refers to the hybridization of the domains of politics and popular culture, of news and entertainment, of serious and comedic. Although

news as entertainment has a long tradition (Thussu, 2007, p. 15), and humor has always been present in political contexts (Bal, Pitt, Berthon, & DesAutels, 2009), media genres that systematically employ humor have struggled in their perceived legitimacy against the “uncontested assumption that news and entertainment be maintained as discrete paradigms” (Feldman, 2007, p. 416; see also LaMarre & Grill, 2018; LaMarre, Landreville, Young, & Gilkerson, 2014). This assumption is based on the notion that the media play a central role for an informed electorate and engaged citizenry (Moy et al., 2005; Thussu, 2015, p. 426). News as entertainment and the emergence of political entertainment has therefore concerned critical media theorists and, measured against this normative expectation of the media, political entertainment media have been associated with a decay in political culture (Esser, 1999; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000), depoliticization of citizens (McChesney, 2008, p. 425; Meyer & Hinchman, 2002, p. 129), crisis of truth (Jones & Baym, 2010), and a dumbing down of the masses (Postman, 1985, p. 84).

On the other hand, it has been proposed that politics can and perhaps should be entertaining, to make political content more accessible to everyday citizens rather than cater solely to elites (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 139; Feldman, 2007; Gans, 2009; Kim & Vishak, 2008). For example, the term *popularization* has been used to destigmatize the tabloidization of news (Gans, 2009), as has the word *tabloid* been defended on the feminist grounds that it allows private life to become visible in the public sphere (Lumby, 1997). In a broader sense, popular culture has also received acclaim as popularizing information (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 141; Fiske, 1992) and the authority of highbrow culture has been called into question in discussions on who controls the media (McChesney, 2008, p. 427). In this context, scholars have proposed that political entertainment media provide pathways to politics (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014;

Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Kim & Vishak, 2008). To better illustrate how the domains of politics and entertainment came to converge, we now briefly review the emergence of political entertainment media in print and television before we turn to the contemporary media environment.

3.1.1 Political entertainment in print and television

With the democratization of Western societies and advances in technology, the press in the 18th century institutionalized as a link between citizens and politics. As a quasi-extension of politics, the emerging media adhered to the normative standards of the political realm as producing solemn and dignified debate (Thussu, 2007, p. 15). The first newspapers therefore mainly relayed newsworthy events, thus making information as a resource available to a literate middle class (Shepard, 1973, p. 64). This primary function of the press shifted with the professionalization of journalism mid-20th century, giving rise to the notion of the press as the *Fourth Estate* and as holding politicians accountable for their decisions by providing a platform for critical dialogue (Baym, 2008, p. 25). It is now widely said that the press as a neutral entity of factual reporting was first challenged by the commercialization of the media that came with the rise of the Penny Press in the late 19th century (Esser, 1999; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Thussu, 2015). Due to the high cost of printing, newspapers were not affordable for everyone, typically accessible via subscription only to affluent citizens. In 1883, however, publisher Benjamin Day began selling his newspaper *The New York Sun* for a penny, thus making it accessible for the rapidly growing working class. To appeal to large audiences, *The New York Sun* systematically printed stories of crime, scandal, and human interest, often stretching the truth to the point of pure fabrication (Thussu, 2007, p. 16; Wu, 2017). For this, Day is credited with establishing *sensationalism*, a term that only began

carrying a negative connotation in the wake of the Penny Press (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Nordin, 1979). The emergence of the Penny Press created a rift between what would henceforth be deemed legitimate and illegitimate political communication—or good and bad journalism (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004).

The second notable convergence of entertainment and journalism dates back to the second half of the 20th century, as television rang in the era of home entertainment (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 1998). With mass entertainment came late-night shows, popularized by *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* from 1962 onward. Aired after the late local news, these shows in their structure resembled traditional news programs but addressed a wide range of topics and included formats such as sketch comedies, monologues, musical performances, and guest interviews. The first late-night programs focused on providing light entertainment and escapism from serious-laden news reporting (Buxton, 1987). Rarely did the shows interfere with politics beyond more than the occasional jab at a politician or daily headline. One noteworthy exception is *Saturday Night Live*'s 1975 mockery of President Ford, regarded as having lastingly influenced his public image and perhaps even costing him the election in 1976 (Compton, 2008). Overall, however, the genre's primary focus on popular culture, show business, and entertainment did not waiver until the 1990s. This came at a time when the commercialization of television also reconceptualized the news genre, particularly televised news reporting. Between 1980 and 1999, a marked rise in soft news, sensationalism, and human interest stories took place (Patterson, 2000; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). Baym (2008, p. 28) writes, "a journalism fashioned as a democratic resource largely has been replaced by a commodified form of infotainment. [...] No longer

the profession of accurately describing reality, most television news has been reconceptualized as the business of telling good stories.”

Continuing this trend of broadening political communication, in 1999 Jon Stewart took over *The Daily Show*, a late-night comedy program that soon gained notoriety as providing more than just entertainment. Although Stewart himself would continue to characterize his show as political comedy, objectively speaking, he did not provide just comedy (Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007). His wit and biting sarcasm offered a critical perspective on daily events at a time “when Americans clearly want[ed] a voice they [could] trust to challenge institutions they believe are failing them” (Cutbirth, 2011). The emergence of *The Daily Show* thus became a critical incident in the reshaping of journalism and blurring between news and entertainment (Feldman, 2007). Stewart became known as a comedian who spoke the truth about US-American politics, perhaps more so than *real* news anchors. His show quickly came to occupy a space in the arena of political journalism and as a result, polls repeatedly found Stewart to be regarded as one of the most trusted and respected journalists in the United States (Love, 2007; Parker, 2007; Poniewozik, 2015). When the public perceives a *fake news*⁵ anchor as a trusted newsperson, there is a case to be made for the genre; indeed, comparative content analyses of late-night shows and traditional hard news ultimately came to the conclusion that political comedy programs are every bit as substantive in their coverage and discussion of politics as hard news (e.g., Fox et al., 2007); *The Daily Show* is just one example of this phenomenon. Whereas, previously, hard news was strictly separated from comedy, the 1990s and 2000s brought about an array of novel formats that walked the line

⁵ *Fake news* is often used as a moniker for late-night shows because they parody news programs, not to be confused with *fake news* as false information (for *fake news* as post-truth in the Trump era, see Bakir & McStay, 2018; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Polletta & Calahan, 2017).

between information and entertainment (Feldman, 2007). This resulted both in a dramatic rise in political comedy formats—as of 2018, more than 20 such shows air on US-American television alone⁶—as well as in a plethora of studies aimed at understanding the influence of political comedy, particularly in comparison to hard news. Although there is certainly research available on other forms of political entertainment, such as graphic novels (e.g., Holbert, Hill, & Lee, 2014), political cartoons (e.g., Foy, 2015; Morris, R. 2009), and satire publications (e.g., Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016), political comedy in the form of late-night shows has been accorded extensive scrutiny (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). Before we turn to extant research on political comedy and entertainment media effects, we present one last step in the evolution of political communication.

When Donald Trump—a man better known for his entertainment value than his political achievements—announced his candidature for president, the arena shifted once more. In December 2015, *The Economist* titled an article, “Jokes about Trump aren’t funny anymore: How do you mock someone who is already a walking caricature of themselves?” This sentiment has only deepened since President Trump took office in 2016. Comedians seemingly struggle to match “the sheer self-evident ridiculousness of the moment” (Taylor, 2018, para. 2). Media critics find that late-night political comedy programs have adopted a more serious tone. With solemn commentary of current events, a clear partisan standpoint, and direct calls to action against the Trump administration, late-night shows are no longer purely comedic, providing accurate and honest political analyses, and holding political actors accountable (Grierson, 2017). This view has further been supported by recent academic work, which finds that in times of political unrest, parody and satire media hold the mainstream

⁶ Not to mention international derivatives such as the German *ZDF Neo Magazin Royale* or *heute show* (Kleinen-von-Königslöw & Keel, 2012; Weinmann, 2017).

media accountable as a democratic institution (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016). With these themes in mind, it seems that when politics become unserious, comedy becomes serious. For now, this has assigned more gravitas to political entertainment media as providing an avenue for serious and meaningful political commentary but whether this is a long-lasting change and what these shifts ultimately mean for political communication, we cannot yet know. From a normative perspective, we might consider a clear demarcation between these sectors a healthier option for democratic systems; from an academic perspective, the overlap between the domains of politics and entertainment in print and television make the study of political entertainment media all the more pressing.

3.1.2 Social media and user-generated content

The rise of social media presents a further critical turning point in the reshaping of the media environment that has widened to not only include new media formats but also provide new possibilities for citizens to engage with politics.

In the participatory and personalized online media sphere, like-minded individuals bind together in online networks and therein relate to information, news, and politics in unconventional ways. Compared to print and broadcast media, the Internet satisfies a variety of needs, such as information-seeking, entertainment, relaxation, social utility, guidance, and ease of access (Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Furthermore, the interactive online environment requires active audience engagement, for which Bruns (2007) coined the term *produsage* to describe the simultaneous consumption and production of media content. The interactive engagement with media content then results in a user-generated remixing of genres and reappropriation of various topics into popular culture. We find ample evidence for this intersectionality between digital media, online politics, and humor

(Baumgartner, 2007; Becker, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Bode, 2017; Burroughs, 2013; Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018; Driscoll, Ananny, & Bar, 2013; Highfield, 2016a, 2016b; Huntington, 2016; Milner, 2013b; Shifman, 2007, 2014; Shifman, Coleman, & Ward, 2007; Shifman & Thelwall, 2009; Vis, 2013).

Second, users experience agency and psychological empowerment when expressing opinions and publishing content online (Leung, 2009). One way in which the political participation of everyday users manifests online is through citizen journalism, whereby individuals gather, analyze, report, and spread news and information, often in contexts in which the conventional media system is perceived as not providing neutral and reliable enough information (Chung & Nah, 2013; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Holton, Coddington, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). Citizen journalism exists outside of the confines of institutionalized media agencies, free of gatekeeping mechanisms and the professional tenets of journalism (Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer, & Vujnovic, 2008). Therefore, the digital media make possible a redrawing of boundaries of authority in the political realm (Owen, 2007). The role that online users play is unique in challenging traditional power structures of the media environment; for example, although news production is still largely dominated by the traditional media, citizen-driven types of journalism also strongly influence agenda-setting, journalistic standards, and political commentary (Domingo et al., 2008).

Whereas the traditional media environment consists of institutionalized news agencies and media conglomerates that hold political actors accountable, today's online communities of bloggers and micro-bloggers have emerged as a new political organ that de-institutionalize the accountability and authority of political elites. In this context, the term *Fifth Estate* refers

to networked individuals who collectively hold the media and other socio-political institutions accountable (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016; Dutton, 2009; Sormanen & Dutton, 2015).

The globalized and networked character of online communities thus underlines the same underlying convergence trends of the traditional mass media (Castells, 2012), although themes of factual reporting, fake news, sensationalism, human interest, and entertainment take on new meaning in the digital sphere. Within this trend, it has become relevant and pertinent to understand how users turn to unconventional political content and how they evaluate and relate to political information. In terms of political effects, it is also important to ask whether political participatory online activities stimulate further political participation forms or whether they produce political cynicism and distrust.

3.2 Media uses and effects

As the media landscape changes and the once clearly separated domains of entertainment and politics continue to merge and evolve, we turn to the societal influence of political entertainment media. This area of research has been tackled in various ways; in the following section, we review the uses and effects of political entertainment media.

3.2.1 Understanding versus entertainment

We begin by examining why people choose to consume political entertainment media. The study of media selection and media use asks why people seek out certain media and what they can gain from doing so. Holbert et al. (2014) identify two explanatory principles that underlie the study of communication media, namely *consistency* and *understanding*. Understanding is a person's motivation to make sense of the world around them. In terms of media use, those motivated by understanding will seek out media as a source of information

to challenge existing assumptions and gain new perspectives. This is contrasted by the principle of consistency, which the authors define as a person's motivation to reduce cognitive dissonance (see also Festinger, 1957). Regarding media use, people motivated to maintain consistency are likely to choose media that align with and enforce their beliefs (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Empirical evidence in support of each principle is available and finds that people generally prefer media that reinforce their beliefs but are not averse to content that challenges their views (see Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Garrett, 2009a, 2009b; Kinder, 2003; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Weeks, Ksiazek, & Holbert, 2016).

Weinmann and Vorderer (2018) expand on the duality of consistency and understanding by arguing that media choices for political entertainment can be explained by a multi-layered construct of entertainment. Our lay understanding of entertainment typically refers to *hedonic entertainment*: the experience of enjoyment, whereby we derive pleasure, fun, or relaxation from media. However, there exists a second type of entertainment, less intuitive at first glance: *eudaimonic entertainment*, which encompasses an irritating or challenging media use experience whereby audiences are made to think more deeply about their lives. Eudaimonic entertainment typically conveys a sense of meaningfulness, which may not be enjoyed but can be appreciated (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Weinmann and Vorderer (2018) propose that the use of political entertainment media can best be understood when we accept this two-tiered construct of the entertainment experience, simultaneously producing pleasure and causing people to reflect on their lives. Recent studies provide tentative evidence of the eudaimonic function of entertainment in motivating political content consumption, thought to stimulate deeper thoughts in audiences (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Mattheiß et al., 2013; Weinmann, 2017). To sum up, people select a media diet that serves the purpose of

furthering understanding, as well as providing consistency. Most likely, the use of political entertainment media is also motivated by the dichotomy of enjoyment and deeper appreciation through the integration of the hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment functions.

3.2.2 Mechanisms of political entertainment effects

Now we turn to the mechanisms by which political entertainment effects can take place. Research on political entertainment effects looks at the persuasiveness of humorous political content. To this end, let us examine humor as an element underlying the entertainment experience, or as a device of political communication (Davis et al., 2018).

Meyer (2000) identifies three humor functions: relief, incongruity, and superiority. Relief theory is grounded in humor as a physiological-emotional response. It proposes that humor relaxes tension in stressful situations or provides pleasure when a person relates to a controversial issue. Incongruity humor is attributed to the element of surprise and takes effect when a norm is challenged in a non-threatening way. This function of humor emphasizes cognition by bringing to light a new perspective and offering audiences an alternative interpretation of reality. Lastly, superiority theory proposes that individuals use humor to differentiate themselves from others by laughing at them, inwardly or outwardly. It is the most hostile form of humor, in that it criticizes opposition and frames others as defeated or inferior. However, although it serves to separate oneself from others, superiority humor can also unify people within a group and thus provide a social function.

All three functions—relief, incongruity, and superiority—are relevant for the political context. For one, political humor can offer comic relief to serious, disheartening, or irritating topics, making information that is presented in a light-hearted manner more bearable to process. Research has shown that people enjoy humorous political content because it relieves

the stress experienced from negative news reporting (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008; Young, 2013). Second, political satire exposes illogical, immoral, or hypocritical behavior. Comedians alert audiences to a problem by pointing out inconsistencies or flaws in argumentation. This reduces the cognitive effort necessary on the part of the audience to evaluate a political message, making such content easier to process (Boukes et al., 2015). This may make humorous political content more accessible to audiences who have fewer resources available to them for processing political messages. Finally, other-disparaging humor can delegitimize a political actor by creating a ridiculous image of that person, for instance, by targeting physical traits or errors in speech. Exposure to negative humor, as is common in political comedy, has been shown to decrease evaluations of political figures (Baumgartner, Morris, & Coleman, 2015; Young, 2012). This function may make it easier for audiences to view themselves as morally superior and discredit opposition. To summarize, humor can take an emotional, cognitive, and social route to successfully transmit its message and is thus a powerful tool for political communication.

3.2.3 Political entertainment effects

Now we come to the effects that political entertainment media can produce. The most comprehensive entertainment genre studied is late-night comedy programs and their audiences. Because late-night programs parody traditional news, a primary outcome investigated in entertainment media is political knowledge. Content analyses have revealed that political information is indeed present in infotainment and soft news programs (e.g., Fox et al., 2007), which then poses the question of how far viewers process and retain this information. First, audience-centered approaches find that viewers of late-night shows are among the most knowledgeable when compared to viewers of hard news programs (Becker &

Bode, 2017; Brewer & Cao, 2006; Young, 2004; Young & Tisinger, 2006; for an opposing view, see Prior, 2005). This finding has sometimes been attributed to the idea that one has to be well-versed in politics to understand political jokes, speaking to a self-selection bias of audiences. However, not only do late-night shows appeal to politically knowledgeable viewers but these programs and their humorous political content also help inform their viewers (Becker & Bode, 2017; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young, 2013). Since 2004, polls from the Pew Research Center have found that respondents continuously cite late-night or comedy shows as a source of political information (Gottfried, Matsa, & Barthel, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2004). Follow-up studies suggest that not all shows are equal, with some providing more complex arguments and thorough political information, leading to a higher learning effect (Moy et al., 2005; Young, 2004). Some authors propose age as a further moderating variable: political comedy not only appeals to younger viewers but also seems to be more effective at informing them than older viewers (Brewer & Cao, 2008; Cao, 2008; Morris, J. S., 2009). Finally, knowledge gain seems to most strongly affect those who are politically inattentive (Xenos & Becker, 2009). Although most of these studies leave the causal direction unclear, a study by Rottinghaus et al. (2008, p. 293) finds that, although a positive relationship to political knowledge may not be fully attributable to late-night comedy itself, entertainment media can function as a gateway to more substantial information sought out from other sources (see also Baum, 2003; Feldman & Young, 2008; Young, 2012; Young & Tisinger, 2006). In summary, we can say that viewers of political comedy programs are politically knowledgeable, turn to political comedy as a source of information, and directly or indirectly achieve moderate knowledge gains from these shows.

A second group of studies has measured the effects of late-night comedy on political attitudes, particularly on variables that function as predictors of traditional political behaviors. An early study by Baumgartner and Morris (2006) reveals that viewers of *The Daily Show* report high levels of internal political efficacy (i.e., the belief that one is able to successfully deal with politics), a finding later replicated by Hoffman and Thomson (2009). At the same time, viewers hold lower levels of trust toward the government and news media than non-viewers. Another study finds that viewers hold more positive attitudes toward the democratic process than non-viewers (Pfau, Houston, & Semmler, 2005). In a recent experiment, Baumgartner, Morris, and Coleman (2015) find that the type of humor is relevant for trust: other-deprecating humor, which is employed by many late-night hosts to mock political actors, decreases trust, whereas self-deprecating humor employed by political candidates can improve their evaluations (see also Brewer & Cao, 2006; Moy et al., 2005). Beyond these attitudinal variables, some studies have also looked at political behavior or behavior intentions. Moy et al. (2005) find a positive relationship between viewers of late-night comedy and political involvement and discussion. Baumgartner and Lockerbie (2018) likewise find that viewers of late-night comedy report higher levels of political participation; again, however, the type of humor matters and the relationship only holds true for viewers of shows that employ political satire as opposed to light-hearted forms of political comedy. It seems that a more elaborate form of cognitive processing takes place when content is fictional (Bartsch, 2012; Kim & Vishak, 2008) or entertaining (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; LaMarre & Grill, 2018; LaMarre et al., 2014).

This supports the notion that when individuals consume political entertainment media with the desire for deeper meaning, they process information more thoroughly and are

therefore more receptive to media effects (see also Feldman, 2013). Entertainment media, when selected with the intent of understanding more about the political sphere, likely lead users to a deeper engagement with political content. The convergence of entertainment and information media of the past decades necessitates a holistic perspective of political entertainment media and the individuals who turn to them.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the history of political entertainment media before turning to the *why*, *how*, and *what* of political entertainment effects. With the continuous merging of media genres, the study of entertainment media and their effects on political life is not yet established enough to provide us with all the answers. This is largely because technological and societal developments continue to challenge the assumptions we have about the role, the uses, and the effects of political entertainment media. Hybrid media formats that enable active and interactive uses are raising new questions about the political ramifications of entertainment media and the individuals who engage in them. As Baumgartner and Becker (2018, p. 315) point out, political comedy's impact cannot be understood without taking into account the intertextuality of contemporary media. The active voice of social media users, political online humor, and interdependencies with new media formats should therefore also inform future work on political entertainment media.

Furthermore, this dissertation is informed by this research field in that the pathways to politics theorized for political entertainment media may also apply to political Internet memes. The fact that Internet memes frequently display political humor suggests that humor is used as a tool for political communication. What specific role humor plays—and whether

meme users look only to be entertained or seek a deeper sort of understanding, in line with eudaimonic entertainment—remains to be seen. This thesis therefore looks to provide a first exploration on the uses of political Internet memes as humorous political content and individuals' motives in selecting and engaging with it.

To contextualize the trend of political entertainment media and forms of soft political participation they elicit, the next chapter examines the evolution of political participation and expansion toward active engagement with online politics.

4 Political participation

As we learned in the second chapter, Internet memes are disseminating into the political arena and vice versa. In the third chapter, we reviewed the uses and effects of political entertainment media to understand how users orient to political media today. To understand the role and influence of political Internet memes in relation to political participation, this chapter first deals with the question of how political participation has traditionally been defined and the problems we face when attempting to integrate new participatory activities into this classic model. A central problem in participation research is that political intent is derived from political context. As we will see, the classic participation framework largely disregards an individual's political intent and focuses on political behavior from an institutional perspective. In this chapter, we therefore first address the influence of the Internet on political participation overall, followed by a discussion of three hypotheses that have been brought forth with respect to individual-level media effects. The chapter then concludes with recommendations on how we might better conceptualize and investigate emergent political participation behaviors, taking into account creative, participatory, digitally networked activities such as Internet meme use and individuals' political intent and motivation in engaging with them.

4.1 Defining political participation

A democracy is only as good as its citizens are engaged, which is why the scope and extent of political participation has always been of interest to those monitoring the democratic health of a society. In loose terms, political participation encompasses all citizen behaviors that affect or involve the political process (van Deth, 2001); however, which behaviors are

considered effective and, furthermore, beneficial to the democratic process has remained a point of debate. Before we discuss recent developments, we begin with a look at the classic conceptualization of political participation. The first pillar of the political participation framework focuses on engagement as conventional political activities that take place within the democratic system. The most widespread and undisputed way for citizens to participate in political life is to vote (Aldrich, 1993) but, between elections, individuals may also attend political party meetings, contribute to campaign efforts, contact officials, run for office, sign petitions, or attend rallies. In line with these forms of engagement, Verba and Nie (1972, p. 2) provide a definition of political participation as “activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take.” The authors deliberately include activities that go beyond simple electoral politics but that remain within the bounds of institutionalized engagement. This notion of political participation characterizes citizen involvement as conducive to democratic processes, as long as the public remains loyal to political institutions, respects legitimate political authority, and acts within the limited role it is institutionally accorded (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Dalton and Welzel (2014) term this the allegiant model of citizenship and we find it reflected in numerous definitions of conventional political participation (e.g., Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995).

The 1970s brought about a widening of this conventional framework. Political scientists studying protest movements had observed that regular citizens sometimes also chose to engage via alternative means of participation, including boycotts, strikes, demonstrations, and modes of civil disobedience such as trespassing, occupying buildings, blocking traffic, damaging property, and interpersonal violence (Marsh & Kaase, 1979, p. 59;

see also Barnes et al., 1979). To be able to measure and trace these activities, scholars pushed to include unconventional forms of engagement in the political participation model. They argued that next to an allegiant citizenry, democracies are also comprised of assertive participants—that is, citizens who challenge elites (Inglehart, 1990), emphasize self-expression, and wish to directly participate in political processes (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Inglehart, 2007). The result was a reconceptualization of political participation as *active* and *deliberate* behavior, *individual or communal*, which *need not be legal or conventional*, and is *aimed at the government* (Fox, 2014). Numerous other authors came to reflect such extrainstitutional modes of engagement in their definitions (e.g., Bean, 1991; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992; Verba et al., 1995). This understanding of political participation has guided the past decades of participation research. Longitudinal, cross-national surveys, which inform many comparative political analyses, typically include both conventional and unconventional forms of engagement⁷. Although this framework continuously has to balance excluding undemocratic activities that could erode the political system and including unconventional activities that might reform a democratic system for the better, by and large, it has adequately reflected citizen participation in Western democracies for many years.

That is, it was adequate until late modernity brought us new modes of participation that fundamentally challenged our classic conceptualization. If we apply the classic

⁷ Examples of cross-national surveys that measure political participation are the World Values Survey, the European Social Survey, the Eurobarometer, and the Global Barometer Survey Series. In addition to measuring political participation, they assess related variables such as political interest, political trust, political efficacy, political orientation and partisanship, political culture, and attitudes toward specific institutions, the political system, and the political process.

framework of political participation today, we see high rates of civic and political disengagement across industrialized democracies, particularly among younger generations (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2016; Putnam, 2000; Smith & Thompson, 2015). However, most participation scholars believe that speaking of an overall decline is misleading, as new forms of engagement have simultaneously emerged, most notably lifestyle-politics, Internet activism, and political consumerism (Dalton, 2004, 2006; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Theocharis 2015; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Norris (2002, p. 215) writes, “political activism has been reinvented in recent decades by a diversification in the *agencies* (the collective organizations structuring political activity), the *repertoires* (the actions commonly used for political expression), and the *targets* (the political actors that participants seek to influence).” This diversification has gone hand in hand with other developments that have profoundly affected how we as citizens relate to one another, our respective system of governance, and our environment: globalization has spurred ethnic pluralism, an understanding of global interconnectedness, and a networked character of societies (Castells, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009); individualization and self-expression values have emphasized personal life and individual choices (Inglehart, 2007; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005); the erosion of traditional institutions has weakened the power of nation-states and elite-directed hierarchical organizations and created new targets of political action (Fox, 2014; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002); and technological advances have created a media landscape with more active user engagement and highly personalized media diets (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Johnson, Zhang, & Bichard, 2011; Young & Anderson, 2017).

Together, these developments have contributed to a new understanding of citizenship, one in which citizens are increasingly engaging through informal, symbolic, creative,

participatory, and digitally networked activities (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Online behaviors can include political activities that formerly took place offline and have now largely moved online (e.g., signing petitions), activities that work in support of political offline behaviors (e.g., coordinating protests), and activities that are new and entirely dependent on the structures of the Internet (e.g., using political profile pictures). Particularly the third group of activities has proved most difficult to classify in terms of political participation, as they happen in environments in which entertainment, social interactions, and self-presentation stand at the forefront (see Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Many of these behaviors are not yet understood in their aim, intent, or effect, mostly owing to the fact that they are not captured in the pre-Internet era conceptualization of political participation. Although there have been a few attempts to add new participation activities to population surveys⁸, the classic criteria of political participation rarely fit these emergent political behaviors. In the following, we cast light on how participation has evolved—first by examining the Internet’s role in participation, then with respect to a modern understanding of political participation that does justice to emergent activities.

4.2 Participation in the Internet era

Because the Internet has a far greater reach than all mass media before it, it has removed long-standing physical boundaries of communication. Although inequalities in

⁸ For example, the European Social Survey (2002) first included two political consumerism activities (boycotting certain products; deliberately buying certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons); numerous other surveys followed suit and now assess respondents’ boycotting behaviors.

Internet access persist in other ways⁹, political communication scholars generally view the Internet as a vehicle to a better informed citizenry (e.g., Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014). Beyond simply offering more political information, the Internet allows users to select media content in line with their personal interests, diversifying media content in general, as well as enabling more individualized media selection and consumption in particular (Johnson et al., 2011). With the rise of the interactive social media platforms, the Internet also encourages active participation and interaction. Although most social media platforms were developed for private or semiprivate use, they can—and routinely do—host a range of political activities (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2016, p. 50). When content is political, everyday users can express their opinions, discuss political issues, coordinate activities, and disseminate information and expertise, without having to go through institutionalized access points or more costly modes of engagement. Particularly for individuals and groups who have traditionally been underrepresented, disregarded, or otherwise disenfranchised by traditional mass media, the Internet is considered a powerful mouthpiece (Coleman, 2006); many authors therefore point out the potential of the Internet in mobilizing new audiences, possibly overcoming some of the participatory gaps that have always marked citizen engagement (Anduiza, Gallego, & Cantijoch, 2010; Borge & Cardenal, 2011; Schlozman et al., 2010).

Furthermore, political online activities do not stand alone; they take place in the highly visible and receptive contexts of social media platforms. Therefore, it is widely believed that political activity online, even when not effective in and of itself, can influence others in their participatory decision making. As such, the Internet has been observed to provide unique and

⁹ See Campbell and Kwak (2010), Morris and Morris (2013), and Mossberger (2009) for further explanations on the digital divide, inequality to Internet access, and proficiency in Internet use.

purposeful support for social movements and collective actions, facilitating their organization, mobilization, and transnationalization (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Numerous social movements of the past years have been supported by ritualized online efforts, such as the Arab Spring, expressions of solidarity in the wake of terrorist attacks, and the Occupy movement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2015; Highfield, 2016b; Hristova, 2014; Milner, 2013b). Margetts et al. (2016, p. 54) write, “on its own, each individual micro-donation of time, effort, or money does nothing for the political cause it is intended to support. [...] But via interactions on social media, through downloading, sharing, viewing, following, retweeting, and so on, tiny acts of participation can scale up to make a major contribution to a political mobilization.” The Internet’s strength, although perhaps not evident in each individual activity, lies in its network and numbers: political acts online are effective when they snowball into large-scale political movements. Overall, the Internet has been characterized as reinforcing political life. Open access and user-based agency have democratized and individualized information, providing a wider base of citizens with more and deeper access to politics (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). Simultaneously, broad reach and interest-based communities connect like-minded individuals and empower small acts that can significantly build momentum.

However, along with these supposed benefits to citizens’ political deliberation and participation, the Internet is also thought to produce some troubling effects. Every structural element that has the potential to support and enhance political life can also contribute to dismantling it. Although the unfettered access to the Internet can serve minorities and disenfranchised groups, it likewise allows for the dissemination of extremist ideologies (Morozov, 2009a). Whereas user-generated content allows for personal expression on political

matters, amateur journalism may erode long-standing norms of political communication (Johnson & John, 2017; Owen, 2007). The individualization of media accords users more choice in media selection but can also create fragmented audiences of people who consume entirely different kinds of information (Sunstein, 2007; Weeks et al., 2016; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). As the community-based structures of social networking sites support digitally networked participation, the group dynamics in online social networks could enhance polarization effects of opinion formation (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Although the ease of access has been thought to bring more people into contact with political matters, low-risk, low-cost online activities are sometimes characterized as siphoning off political involvement at the expense of *true* participation (Putnam, 2000; Sander & Putnam, 2010, p. 15; Shulman, 2009). Finally, although the acceptance of the Internet into everyday life has provided a public sphere with less barriers and gatekeeping mechanisms, it has also come with the commercialization of the Internet, where attention is traded as a commodity (Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Wu, 2017). There is reason to have both hope and concern around these effects. Due to the complexity of the Internet's structure and breadth of activities available to users, we now take a closer look at media-psychological mechanisms of specific activities and contexts.

4.3 Internet effects

To clarify whether and how the Internet affects individuals in their decisions to engage in politics, we now turn to findings focused on the individual level. In the following, we address three questions that have been studied in political participation research: (1) Do online activities encourage other forms of participation (mobilization hypothesis)? (2) Do online

activities hinder or replace other forms of participation (slacktivism hypothesis)? (3) Can online activities be considered political participation in and of themselves (diversification hypothesis)? Because both constructs—*online activism* and *political participation*—are complex and constantly changing, the three hypotheses we discuss do not have to be understood as exclusive of each other and merely provide points of entry into the possible relationships of online and offline political activities.

4.3.1 Mobilization hypothesis

The most widespread theory about how the Internet affects political participation at the individual level centers on mobilization (Norris, 2001). Due to the low barriers created by the Internet, many scholars believe that online activities introduce less politically inclined users to political topics, leading them to more purposeful political action (see, e.g., Becker & Copeland, 2016; Bode, 2017; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2013). Overall, numerous studies find evidence of a positive relationship between Internet use and political engagement. For example, Boulianne (2015) in her meta-analysis, finds that over 82% of coefficients show positive effects of social media use on participation, of which about half are statistically significant. However, she also notes that longitudinal studies are less likely to report positive and significant effects than cross-sectional surveys and is thus hesitant to speak of causal effects (for a further meta-analysis that comes to similar conclusions, see Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016).

If we do assume causal effects, there are several ways in which mobilization could take place. Valenzuela (2013) suggests that mobilization effects happen via two routes. First, because social media platforms weave political and private life together, users invariably come into contact with political topics, even when a user's primary aim is identity

construction, social relationships, or entertainment (Valenzuela, 2013). Such incidental exposure to news, coupled with more deliberate news consumption, allows users to obtain prerequisites political knowledge that is necessary for further political action. Second, Valenzuela proposes that actively engaging with political topics online through expressing an opinion induces deeper information processing and reasoning. Similar to how offline political expression, talk, and discussion have been found to foster political activity, the author believes that formulating political arguments online leads users to higher political engagement. In line with these predictions, he finds that the use of social media for both news consumption and opinion expression has an effect on political protest activities (Valenzuela, 2013).

A further proposed route to mobilization is thought to happen by way of easy online behaviors that create political habits and deepen engagement over time. For example, Bode (2017) finds that individuals across the board engage in easy political behaviors such as liking and commenting on political content, regardless of their political interest, and that those most likely to engage in these activities are also those who engage in other, more costly political behaviors. Leyva (2017) also finds evidence for reinforcement effects in politically interested individuals, as well as mobilization effects in disaffected youths. However, because socioeconomic background and political interest remain relevant predictors in his study of UK youths, he concludes that the mobilization effects of social media use are rather insignificant.

In addition to political interest, political efficacy has been suggested as a moderator. One study by Halpern, Valenzuela, and Katz (2017) finds that efficacy moderates the relationship between sharing political information and participation. When using Facebook or Twitter, users experience a heightened sense of personal or collective agency, an individual's

belief that through their efforts—individually or collectively—they can impact political processes; political efficacy is considered a well-established predictor of political participation (Bandura, 1997; Lee, 2010). Indeed, Halpern et al. (2017) find different forms of efficacy related to different social networking sites: Facebook use fosters collective efficacy, whereas Twitter use is found to create internal efficacy. In both cases, the authors argue, technological structures promote political discussion in ways that empower citizens to take individualized and collective action. By contrast, Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) do not find that a sense of political efficacy is increased through online expression but do find that it boosts situational political involvement, or the interest in a specific political issue such as an election outcome. Further, they find that paying attention to traditional news sources on the Internet relates to both political self-efficacy and political situational involvement. They come to the conclusion that social media has several unique distinguishing features—it can provide information that users may not find elsewhere and lowers entry barriers into politics—but must be supplemented with additional media to have beneficial effects on users' political decision making.

In a later study, Yamamoto, Kushin, and Dalisay (2017) propose that social media use for political information intersects the pathway between cynicism and political apathy. Because online participation often takes place within personalized social networks, factors related to group membership and social recognition could work in favor of mobilization effects. The authors suggest that “the social rather than informational utility of social media” (Yamamoto et al., 2017, p. 5) reins in individuals, particularly those who are not politically interested. Social networks could aid in embedding politics into the everyday life

of disengaged individuals, emphasizing the role of social media for apathetic and disaffected individuals; their study's findings confirm this hypothesis.

Finally, social identity is theorized to affect collective actions. For example, Gerbaudo (2015) proposes that political protest avatars (profile pictures on social networking sites with overlaid text or images) can serve as memetic signifiers to construct collective identities. In turn, collective identification is thought to bind together individuals, communicate unified intentions to externals, and mobilize users to a movement. Gerbaudo (2015) concludes, "through these simple acts individual subjects, otherwise deprived of affiliation to formal mass organizations, temporarily surrender part of their own unique individuality, in order to become an active unit in a collective aggregate that transcends their own actions" (p. 927).

The mobilization hypothesis for social media proposes that political information and discussions introduce uninterested and uninformed users to low-key political activities that, over time, develop into habitual and deeper political engagement. Online activities may also foster a sense of individual and collective political efficacy. Finally, the nature of social networking sites is proposed to create a social identity, that could prove fruitful in mobilizing participation. Overall, the mobilization effects of Internet and social media use are well established (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018; Skoric et al., 2016). However, in the converging media environment today it is not clear how nonpolitical or semipolitical online activities relate to other forms of engagement. Some authors find that nonpolitical online activity mobilize people to engage in politics (Kahne et al., 2013), whereas others find that nonpolitical online activities distract from meaningful participation (Theocharis & Lowe, 2016).

This ambiguity has further fueled speculations on possible harmful effects of social media, such as the slacktivism effect.

4.3.2 Slacktivism hypothesis

The second prominent theory regarding Internet effects on individual participation behavior is called the slacktivism hypothesis, which claims that the Internet reduces political engagement. Slacktivism is a combination of the words *slacker*¹⁰ and *activism*; its proponents believe that political online activities primarily serve to make users feel good, without producing meaningful political impact (Morozov, 2009b). Furthermore, they believe these activities to be harmful to democracies, in that they induce a sense of complacency and thereby crowd out more traditional forms of participation (Shulman, 2009). However, the term slacktivism is imprecise because it hinges on the definition of *meaningful* political activity. Measured against the classic participation model, especially against conventional political activities, online activities can certainly be considered ineffective; measured against emergent forms of participation, the effect of such activities is often less clear. To avoid this problem, some participation scholars simply label all low-cost online activities as slacktivism, assuming that little effort automatically translates to little impact (e.g., Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Leyva, 2017). Because the constructs in question are difficult to measure, little evidence is available for the slacktivism hypothesis and most proponents limit themselves to anecdotal evidence or speculation that they derive from structural aspects of the Internet (see Morozov, 2009a, 2009b).

¹⁰ The Oxford English Dictionary (2018) defines *slacker* as “a person regarded as one of a large group or generation of young people (esp. in the early to mid 1990s) characterized by apathy, aimlessness, and lack of ambition.”

Although flawed in their demonstrability, these speculations may not be entirely groundless, as evidence for a similar effect has recently surfaced. The theory of moral licensing, also known as moral balancing, suggests that an initial act of prosocial behavior—behavior that benefits others and typically comes at a cost to oneself—under certain conditions leads to less subsequent prosocial behavior. The theory claims that individuals seek balance between engaging in altruistic and egoistic activities. Once a prosocial behavior produces a positive self-image or gains recognition from others, an individual feels *licensed* to perform self-serving behavior without discrediting themselves (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Monin & Jordan, 2009). For example, in Tiefenbeck, Staake, Roth, and Sachs' (2013) study, residents of an apartment complex who were given feedback on water consumption lowered their water use but simultaneously increased their electricity consumption. An ancillary effect known as *moral cleansing* works in the other direction: an individual who believes to be seen as immoral by others tends to behave more prosocially to restore or *cleanse* their moral image (Sachdeva, Ilic, & Medin, 2009).

The moral licensing theory runs at odds with well-established theories on the consistency mechanism, whereby prosocial behavior is assumed to be followed by more prosocial behavior, as individuals strive to keep consistency in their behavior and self-image (for cognitive dissonance, see Festinger, 1957; for foot-in-the-door technique, see Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Both the moral licensing and consistency approaches to prosocial behavior are justified; it is assumed that different pathways to prosocial behavior can be activated by impression management motives or moral self-image. Environments that are especially conducive to socially observed activities and in which individuals are particularly dependent on managing their impression might activate moral licensing mechanisms over consistency

mechanisms. For this reason, social media sites have been associated with moral licensing mechanisms *vis-à-vis* prosocial behavior as a proxy for civic involvement. For example, Soyer, Cornelissen, and Karelaia (2013) find that symbolic expression of one's opinion in an online-replicated setting suffices to reduce monetary contributions to a charity organization. The authors suggest that low-cost online activities could have a negative impact on subsequent prosocial behavior. Kristofferson, White, and Peloza (2014) find similar effects across five studies, showing that social observability of an initial symbolic prosocial behavior moderates moral licensing versus consistency effects. Concretely, they find that costless prosocial behavior can lead to less subsequent prosocial behavior when individuals are observed by others and do not strongly identify with a cause.

If we then apply these findings to political online activities, the moral licensing theory would predict that an individual carrying out a symbolic political activity that is observed by others would have satisfied their quota of political engagement, thus suppressing the need for further political behavior. This effect would be amplified when individuals identify less strongly with a cause, meaning that the Internet would not be able to foster engagement in online users who are casually coming into contact with politics. According to the slacktivism hypothesis, the proliferation of political online activism would produce less political participation in the long run. However, moral licensing is only beginning to be discovered in connection to the online realm. As a new research field, it will need to look more closely at Internet activities and users and, together with media and communications scholars, determine under which circumstances online users engage or disengage in civic and political life.

4.3.3 Diversification hypothesis

The last question we turn to is whether the Internet is producing political activities that are unique to the digital realm or, as Vissers and Stolle (2014, p. 938) put it: “The implicit questions are whether online participation is a completely new and different phenomenon that stands out from other offline forms, draws in new people, is caused by other factors, or has new drastic political consequences.” We call this the diversification hypothesis. It proposes that political participation as a whole is diversifying, with some online activities representing new forms of engagement that should be studied independently of their effects on classic forms of political participation. Of course, studying isolated political behaviors without placing them in relation to other political activities complicates a classification of these behaviors. All the same, a few authors have made some initial contributions to the diversification hypothesis.

First, Oser, Hooghe, and Marien (2013) use data from a representative US-American sample to analyze participation in four political online activities and their offline counterparts (signing a petition versus signing an online petition; starting or joining a political group through a social networking site versus being an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or government). Their analyses reveal that online participation manifests as a distinct form of participation that does not occur at the expense of offline participation. Instead, individuals who are politically engaged online tend to incorporate these activities into their general participation repertoire. Because the items assessed mirror political offline participation, the findings primarily point to a diversification of *context* (online/offline) rather than of *activities* (i.e., a replication of familiar offline modes of participation to online spaces). However, other authors, building on these findings, propose

that these activities may not be entirely identical to their offline counterparts. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) empirically show that online political participation encompasses multiple dimensions of interrelated activities and that some of these activities—namely, news consumption and expressive actions—cannot be compared to their offline counterparts. They suggest that these behaviors take “on a more active, collective, and networked quality in the online environment” (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 714) and conclude that certain activities, despite being available offline, are accorded a more active participatory character in highly visible and interactive online spaces.

In their new taxonomy of political participation, Theocharis and van Deth (2018) term these activities *digitally networked participation*. Replicating Gibson and Cantijoch’s (2013) findings, they show that digitally networked activities constitute “a new and distinct mode of participation” (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018, p. 19). Theocharis and van Deth point out that contemporary surveys rarely capture political online engagement because population surveys and their closed-ended questions tend to consider only known dimensions of political participation and therefore do not recognize these new activities. However, a handful of scholars manage to touch upon these forms of participation. For example, Valenzuela (2013), whose study on mobilization effects we reviewed earlier, proposes that political expression can be considered a political activity in and of itself because it is participatory and conducted with the intent of engaging in the public realm. Such informal participation behaviors were previously considered fringe behaviors of participation but gain new meaning in the context of the Internet; they are then argued through the political motive and intent of users. For example, a recent study by Gil de Zúñiga, Valenzuela, and Weeks (2016) zeroes in on user motivations. The study finds that both social and civic motivations predict political

discussions and indirectly relate to civic engagement. The authors conclude that political talk may need to be considered a more complex phenomenon, in that social motivations can provide an additional pathway to (online) civic participation. Another recent study of civic and political participation by youths in Balkan countries empirically supports the distinction between online and offline activism (Milošević-Đorđević & Žeželj, 2017), although the authors point out that online and offline activism also fuel one another, which supports the mobilization hypothesis.

Finally, Hartley (2010) uses the term *silly citizenship* to describe forms of citizen engagement that use playful conventions of Internet culture for new modes of political deliberation. He argues that participation in public life has historically evolved toward mediated, do-it-yourself citizenship where active audiences “use leisure entertainment to inform themselves and to connect with co-subjects” (Hartley, 2010, p. 239). Davis et al. (2018) employ the notion of silly citizenship to analyze Tweets that are both humorous and enact political engagement. They conclude that the functions of using humorous political content are to express opposition, establish political subjectivity, and bolster civic support. Although the authors suggest that the use of political humor online can also mobilize to further action, they find that close to 70% of funny political tweets do some form of political work, leading them to conclude that social media and political humor are, together, relevant for citizens’ political action and participation (Davis et al., 2018; see also Becker, 2014b; Tully & Ekdale, 2014)

The diversification hypothesis is the most problematic of the hypotheses on individual-level social media effects because new online activities do not neatly fit the criteria of political participation. Some suggest understanding these activities as political in their own

right because we observe them in political contexts; others argue that all political participation must be embedded within known and measurable political outcomes. How then do we better study online activities that may or may not be political? This question is particularly pertinent as creative, participatory, informal, silly, and digitally networked activities are rising and speculations about their role and effect are made on all sides.

4.3.4 Future avenues for participation research

Several elements are necessary if we want to move forward in the study of online political participation. For one, we need a working definition of what we consider political participation today. In addition to studying emerging activities in relation to conventional and unconventional political participation, it might be valuable to broaden the approach to participation activities. In recent years, this problem has been approached by asking how users orient to online content (Feldman, 2013) and how they use digital media (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). Specifically, instead of relying on generic conceptualizations of Internet use or social media use it has been proposed that scholars differentiate more closely between types of digital media uses (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). Furthermore, if we subscribe to the notion that the Internet generates valuable forms of political participation, either by diversifying participation or by supporting existing modes, a further point would be to ask for the political intent of users. Van Deth (2014) proposes that in rethinking our assumptions of what makes up political participation, we might add a motivational definition. It would help us distinguish non-politically motivated activities of political participation and politically motivated collective or community-oriented activities. For example, we believe that when we witness an individual attending a demonstration, they are politically engaged but attending a demonstration could be motivated by social factors. In addition, non-political engagement

such as membership in community organizations could also have implications for political behavior, for instance, shaping how people think about the political realm (see also Fitzgerald, 2013). The problem is that we typically derive political intent from context and thereby disregard activities that are not at first glance political. Looking at what motivates behavior that is not obviously political could provide valuable insight into how political fringe behaviors play into the political participation repertoire of individuals.

Clarifying individuals' political intent to engage in such activities needs to be supplemented with measures of their effect. Arguably, a normative evaluation of political effects is a slippery slope and has been at least since the expansion of the political participation framework to include unconventional activities. However, as a new approach, we might consider that if individuals engage online because they believe these activities to contribute to the political realm, we need to assess whether these activities achieve what they are intended to, regardless of how beneficial we deem these effects. For instance, if individuals choose to politically participate by expressing their experiences and opinions in national online discourses for the sake of raising awareness, this activity can be considered effective if individuals accomplish said goal of raising awareness. Conversely, if individuals' political aim is not reflected in the effect of their actions, proponents of the slacktivism effect might be right in assuming complacency-induced disengagement through the misconception of *having done good*. In other words, by matching intent with effect, we can learn whether the Internet produces modes of participation that function outside of the classic participation framework or whether users are deluding themselves into thinking their online activities are meaningful when they are not.

Lastly, if we want to give serious consideration to emerging activities, we must know where to classify them in the contemporary political landscape. Although some have suggested that new forms of participation could be guided by entirely new factors (Vissers & Stolle, 2014), the question of how such activities relate to well-established variables, such as political interest, remains relevant. No longer allowing these activities to pass beneath the radar of participation research necessitates a holistic understanding of the mechanisms and effects that take place in and around these activities. Therefore, a third element of the study of emerging political activities necessitates measuring the factors that might designate these behaviors—political interest, political trust, political efficacy, social identity, and political information—as either predictors or outcomes of political participatory online activities. Considering antecedents and consequences constitutes a crucial puzzle piece in understanding the role and impact of these as-of-yet unrecognized political activities.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter first covered the classic framework of political participation before reviewing the structural elements of the Internet that are thought to affect citizen participation. It then presented the three hypotheses on political online activities: mobilization, slacktivism, and diversification. We find that the effects of the Internet on users' political participation remain inconclusive as a whole, although all three hypotheses provide valid points of entry for individual activities and contexts. Therefore, I proposed ways in which the field, moving forward, might better study online activities as a part of the contemporary political landscape. In light of the slacktivism hypothesis and its underlying moral licensing mechanisms, I propose that we assess if certain online activities hinder forms of participation. Additionally,

we should be asking whether online activities themselves affect political life by constituting deliberate and impactful activities for the individuals engaged; we should therefore measure the political intent as well as personal motivation of users and compare these to measurable socio-political effects. To gain a clearer understanding of how ordinary people come into contact and engage with political topics, we should take into consideration new media formats that represent the interconnectedness of entertainment and politics in everyday media practices.

This dissertation utilizes these points of entry in order to study the use of political Internet memes within the wider expansion of citizens' political participation repertoires.

5 Research questions and research design

Because Internet memes appear in political dialogues, as tools of dissent or subversion, and as everyday social media practices, Shifman (2014, p. 172) proposes that contemporary memetic research look at and measure the political change memes generate. We must therefore examine where political Internet meme use falls in our conceptualization of citizenship, participatory culture, and political participation. Is the use of political Internet memes a form of slacktivism—does it represent a form of token support that has no meaningful social or political impact and that decreases the overall engagement of citizens (Kristofferson et al., 2014; Morozov, 2009b; Shulman, 2009)? Or is the use of political Internet memes beneficial for democracies? Can political meme use be understood as a tool for citizenship that mobilizes citizens to other forms of engagement (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018)? Or can we also understand the use of political Internet memes as citizenship in its own right, a form of citizenship that reflect the diversification of political participation toward creative, digitally networked, humorous forms of engagement (Hartley, 2010; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018)?

If we want to understand why Internet memes appear in political settings and what societal role they play, we have two points of entry. First, we can study memetic content. By understanding memes as mirrors of society, we can learn about said society if we analyze the topics that are discussed and look at the contexts in which memes appear. For the most part, this is what the study of contemporary memetics does (Freelon & Karpf, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2018; Shifman, 2014; Wang et al., 2016). However, a second approach is to ask the persons involved about their motives to use memes, experiences in engaging with them, and

perceptions of memes' role and impact in various settings. As of now, this aspect is missing in modern memetics research.

To this end, this thesis seeks to provide one building block to the study of the political change memes generate by focusing on political Internet memes from a user-centered, media-psychological perspective. This makes meme users rather than memes our object of research and places their motivations, perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors at the center of this research project. Because of the exploratory nature of this topic, we draw on findings from related fields. Assumptions derived from scholarly literature on entertainment media, political humor effects, political communication, social media uses, and political participation inspired the questions this thesis asks about the uses and effects of political Internet memes. However, these assumptions may or may not apply to Internet memes and their users; we must therefore remain vigilant of preconceptions that may have influenced this work. For the sake of transparency, let us review these assumptions before we introduce the research questions and research design.

The first assumption revolves around the role of Internet memes. Based on memetics research, we can assume that memes are societally relevant in that they represent a population's norms, opinions, values, and ideas and therefore act as a cultural compass for individuals who come into contact with them. In their diversity and ubiquity, Internet memes take up and reflect all socio-cultural domains, including but not limited to entertainment, celebrity culture, popular culture, the public sphere, civic life, and politics. Because of this potpourri of topics and applications, Internet memes may not need to be overtly political to affect political life. In other words, we need not debate or evaluate the *politicalness* of Internet memes; rather, what is political lies in the eye of the beholder (i.e., the eye of the meme user).

In studying memes under the assumption that they *might* constitute a form of political content to users and that meme use *may* function as a political activity, we can freely ask users about their perception of memes' purpose and impact in political contexts. This thesis thus looks to explore the purpose of political spreadable media and participatory activity through the example of political Internet memes and the users behind them.

The second assumption relates to the use of Internet memes. We define Internet memes as “artifacts of participatory digital culture,” and presuppose that users who engage with memes do so to participate in an ongoing socio-cultural conversation (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Thus, we assume that meme use functions like other media use; as such, we believe memes serve many functions and individuals who seek out memes likely do so for specific reasons. Understanding users' motives for engaging with memes can help guide our understanding of why and for what purposes memes are sought out and used. From this, we conceptualize a deliberate and conscious use of Internet memes, which allows for individuals to reflect on their motives for meme use.

Our third assumption is based on media effects research. We assume that, like the use of other media content, memes affect meme users. In the tradition of political entertainment research, entertainment and humor may facilitate political pathways. Particularly relevant to the study of participation research is the question of the mobilization versus slacktivism effects this behavior could have. Through other uses such as entertainment and social interactions, memes may introduce political topics to people who use them for non-political purposes. Memes may also affect users' propensity to engage in other ways by affecting related constructs such as social identity, political efficacy, and political trust. These effects may not be obvious to users, which means that although *using* memes is a deliberate and

conscious effort, the *effects* of meme use may not be deliberate or even obvious. The alignment of these two aspects is therefore essential in understanding meme effects on both an individual and societal level.

Studying the use and effects of Internet memes as societally relevant media content for political contexts from a user-centered perspective has threefold relevance: it broadens our understanding of memes' role and impact in political life, it contributes to the study of political entertainment media and how they relate to political life, and it sheds light on emergent political activities. In the empirical section of this thesis, we explore these assumptions through a sequential, mixed methods design by asking the following overarching research questions:

- RQ1: What role do individuals accord to Internet memes in political contexts?
- RQ2: Are Internet memes a relevant element of today's political participation repertoire?
- RQ3: Does the use of political Internet memes affect political life on an individual level?

To answer these research questions, this thesis comprises three individual studies, that each answer a subset of these questions. We begin with a qualitative interview study with meme users to establish how individuals encounter memes, why they use them, and whether they believe memes to play a significant political role. The two research questions posed in study one are as follows:

- RQ1.1: From the perspective of Internet meme users, what uses and gratifications motivate the use of Internet memes?

RQ1.2: From the perspective of Internet meme users, what impact do Internet memes have in political contexts?

The second study seeks to expand the findings of the first study by looking at the relationship between the use of political Internet memes and political variables. It consists of a survey that, in the tradition of political participation research, quantitatively assesses the political attitudes and behaviors of individuals who engage with political Internet memes. The research questions and respective hypotheses for study two are as follows:

RQ2.1: Does use of political Internet memes relate to political interest?

H2.1: Political interest predicts the use of political Internet memes.

RQ2.2: Does the use of political Internet memes relate to political efficacy?

H2.2: The perceived political efficacy of Internet memes predicts the use of political Internet memes.

RQ2.3: Does the use of political Internet memes relate to political distrust?

H2.3: Political distrust does not predict the use of political Internet memes.

RQ2.4: Does the use of political Internet memes relate to other forms of political participation?

H2.4.1: The use of political Internet memes predicts political participation.

H2.4.1: The use of political Internet memes predicts unconventional political participation better than conventional political participation.

The third and last study consists of an experiment that isolates different meme behaviors and tests their effects on individuals' propensity to actively engage with a cause. It first asks whether active meme production versus passive meme consumption activate mechanisms of moral licensing, and second, whether public versus private meme production produce impression management effects. The research questions and respective hypotheses for study three are as follows:

RQ3.1: Does moral licensing affect the prosocial behavior of individuals using Internet memes?

H3.1: Meme production results in less subsequent prosocial behavior than meme consumption.

RQ3.2: Does impression management affect the prosocial behavior of individuals producing Internet memes?

H3.2: Public meme production results in less subsequent prosocial behavior than private meme production.

In summation, this thesis explores the motives for individuals to use political Internet memes to understand whether users turn to memes with an express political intent. It then examines political participation of Internet meme users and lastly tests the mobilizing effect of using political Internet memes in an experimental setting. Taken together, the three studies explore the appeal, function, and impact of Internet memes in political contexts.

6 Study 1: Motives for using political Internet memes

Political Internet memes play an increasingly significant part in political discourse worldwide. Contemporary memetics research is beginning to understand these units of culture as forms of participatory content and finds that political Internet memes can fulfill a number of political functions. To understand whether users themselves ascribe Internet memes a political role and consider their use an alternative to or supplement of traditional political participation, this study provides a user-centered perspective focusing on the motives of Internet meme use. In this exploratory Delphi study, participants discuss the uses and gratifications for using Internet memes in political contexts. A subsequent qualitative content analysis provides insight into the role of political Internet memes in social movements and everyday politics from the point of view of meme users. Users perceive memes as a tool for easy, effortless engagement in the public sphere, driven by the interplay of *self-expression*, *social identity*, and *entertainment* motives. Participants also delve into the advantages as well as shortcomings of using Internet memes for political purposes, concluding that political Internet memes can only support other political efforts. The following study contributes to our understanding of Internet memes in political life, gives insight into an emergent form of political engagement, and provides a touchstone for further research on user-generated infotainment.

6.1 Introduction

In the ongoing discussion revolving around changing socio-political engagement, social media are frequently characterized as an attractive and effective way for citizens to participate in political life (Highfield, 2016b). Against this backdrop, political Internet memes

are garnering scholarly interest as they increasingly appear in social movements and political campaigns (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Internet memes are defined as “groups of items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created, transformed, and circulated by many participants through digital participatory platforms” (Gal et al., 2016, p. 1700). Through memes, creators can address a wide variety of topics, from personal experience to public commentary (Plevriti, 2013). Emergent memes are typically curated on social news websites and image boards but once viral, memes quickly find their way onto mainstream social media platforms and even into the news media (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Due to their omnipresence in recent socio-political contexts, political Internet memes have been berated by some as ruining democracy (Haddow, 2016) and praised by others as empowering the masses (Hess, 2016).

From observational studies and content analyses of memetic content, we can infer a number of political roles that Internet memes are able to fulfill. To this end, Shifman (2014, pp. 122–123) defines three functions of political Internet memes: (1) memes as forms of persuasion or political advocacy, (2) memes as grassroots action, and (3) memes as modes of expression and public discussion. These functions offer insight into the political space which memes can occupy yet leave open how users relate to memes. A systematic analysis of the motives for users to employ Internet memes is outstanding. This approach is particularly pertinent for content which is rapidly re-appropriated across different contexts: a meme that started out as apolitical may become political in a different context or it may be perceived as political by some users but not by others. And, like most forms of user-generated content, Internet memes mix complex socio-political issues with playful elements of humor and popular culture (Highfield, 2016b; Plevriti, 2013; Shifman, 2007). Although we might

therefore objectively define an Internet meme as political, this does not indicate whether a creator intended it to be political nor whether a subsequent user will also perceive it as political or deliberately employ it for political purposes. This study aims to close this gap by assessing the motives for users to seek out Internet memes and thereby better understand the political role users ascribe to memes. The following sections review research on the role of Internet memes in political contexts, user-generated content from a uses and gratifications perspective, and the effects of political humor and entertainment.

6.2 Internet memes and politics

Since its inception, the Internet has spurred curiosity as well as suspicion about its role in the political landscape. Initially, many scholars held the Internet responsible for the poor health of democracies, deeming low political engagement and rising political apathy to be symptoms of a disinterested youth looking only to be entertained (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 159; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Some argued that the ephemeral nature of political online discourse fosters slacktivism—the notion that shallow, feel-good activities reduce an individual's effort for meaningful political action (Christensen, 2011; Hesse, 2009; Hindman, 2009; Rotman et al., 2011).

Over the years, most early theories about the negative effects of the Internet did not hold up to empirical scrutiny and instead, studies revealed the complexities underlying the relationship of new media and politics. Today, our understanding of the Internet's role in the political participation and civic engagement of citizens is more nuanced. The Internet and particularly social media are variously seen as helpful, banal, and problematic (Highfield, 2016b, p.105). Although the slacktivism hypothesis remains a point of contention among

some political scientists and communications scholars (Vitak et al., 2011), most agree that social media allow users to more easily participate in politics (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014) and provide the masses with low-barrier access to political content (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010). Users are enabled to bring their political view into the digital public sphere and to actively participate in political and social processes (Papacharissi, 2010). Since social media typically circumvent the gatekeeping mechanisms of traditional media they are especially pertinent for alternative politics and activist networks (Dylko, Beam, Landreville, & Geidner, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009). This is evident in protest movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, or the Gezi Park movement, where social media played a key role in networking protesters and giving them a voice (Castells, 2012, p. 221; Odağ, Uluğ, & Solak, 2016; Rane & Salem, 2012).

The Occupy movement was also one of the first instances in which the general public became aware of the explicit political potential of Internet memes. Recent memetics research hence tends to emphasize the role of memes in social movements. For example, Milner (2013b) writes that protesters who employ Internet memes during the Occupy movement do so to articulate perspectives and to participate in political discourse. He posits that Internet memes played a crucial role in shifting the national discussion during the 2011 protests (Milner, 2013b). Hristova (2014) in her study of Internet memes during the Occupy movement also examines the relationship between online and offline political action. Her findings indicate that protesters formed a “meme movement” and relied on Internet memes for “outreach and definition” (p. 275). Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 747) find that memes serve as “collective action frames” to express political claims in social movements. Shifman

(2014, p. 129) adds, “memes allow citizens to participate in public, collective actions, while maintaining their sense of individuality.”

These observational studies attest to the relevance of Internet memes for political activism in such protest movements and re-iterate the political role protesters can choose to attribute to memes. Internet memes in social movements seemingly serve as citizens’ collective mouthpiece and potentially influence the way a movement is seen and engaged with by political actors and the news media. Plevriti (2013), who examines the motives for users to employ satirical memes, indeed finds self-expression to be the principal reason for meme creation—users feel they are able to raise awareness about issues they deem important. They create and share political Internet memes to promote causes and to spark discussion on political issues. Plevriti also finds that using memes enhances identity, community-building, and solidarity because Internet memes exist as part of a communally curated, social media repertoire.

However, political Internet memes are not exclusive to times of crisis and unrest and evolve more haphazardly in the everyday interactions of social media users. For example, in early 2018 a parody rendition of the music video *Satisfaction*, uploaded by a group of Russian cadets, caused a nationwide stir. Due to its homoerotic content it quickly attracted censorship attempts from the Russian regime. Out of solidarity for the creators, a wide array of social groups—medical students, pensioners, emergency service workers, sports club members, and nurses—began creating and spreading remakes of the video (Gessen, 2018). What on part of the cadets began as a trivial joke quickly turned into a political Internet meme protesting homophobia and government censorship. The groups acted without discernible structure or organization, yet effortlessly recreated the central elements of the original video. Political

Internet memes thus also frequently appear spontaneously and randomly turn from playful to political when the situation warrants it.

Despite the fascination with Internet memes as a social phenomenon and emergent research topic, there still exists no consensus on why political Internet memes are used. Highfield (2016b, p. 86) argues that memes, like much of social media content, provide ongoing commentary and allow users to make sense of unfolding political events. Ross and Rivers (2017) point out, “memes are an organic means through which citizens can respond in almost real time to contemporary political events,” and attribute this to the anonymity inherent to the communal process of meme creation and dissemination (p. 3). Wiggins & Bowers (2015) purport that memes are created “for the purpose of continuing a conversation,” by possessing both cultural and social attributes which “reconstitute the social system” (p. 6). Most contemporary studies on Internet memes are able to provide a glimpse into different functions of memes but a comprehensive analysis of user motives for political Internet memes is missing.

6.3 Uses and gratifications of user-generated content

Uses and Gratifications Theory supposes an active audience that purposefully seeks out media in order to fulfill specific needs and obtain gratifications (Leung, 2009; Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011). These sought and obtained gratifications, together with past media experience, motivate the continued use of media (Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985). Although *gratifications obtained* are good predictors of ritualized media use, *gratifications sought* correspond more closely to the

motives users are aware of when seeking out media content and therefore primarily pertain to self-reported motives for media use (see Leung, 2013).

Research on traditional media has thoroughly explored the uses and gratifications individuals seek and gain from consuming media (see Blumler, 1979; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Rubin, 2009). In recent years, the framework has expanded to the study of new media and found that information and entertainment remain two of the main motives for users to engage with and consume content (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Whiting & Williams, 2013). The information motive allows users to learn more about themselves, their peers, and the world they live in. Entertainment provides users with relaxation, enjoyment, mood management, escapism from their daily lives, and emotional release (Shao, 2009).

With the interactive nature of social media platforms, Uses and Gratifications Theory today also encompasses motives for active content production. Producing content is most often associated with self-expression: user-generated content provides users with the opportunity to talk back and define their own voice (Meyers, 2012). Users create content in order to express and share feelings, experiences, and points of view and to enhance psychological empowerment through self-efficacy, perceived competence, and a desire for control (Leung, 2009). Producing content may also be identity-forming, in that users can construct a self-image, gain recognition, and uphold their reputation among peers (Shao, 2009). Additionally, self-evaluative incentives may be a way for users to experience satisfaction when meeting desired standards; the high reactivity of social media platforms incentivizes users to create content which others will be likely to engage with (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Joyce & Kraut, 2006; Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2012).

The uses and gratifications for participating with content in other ways (e.g., rating content, commenting on content) have also been studied. Leung (2013) finds that social and affection needs, venting negative feelings, recognition, and entertainment can be satisfied by generating and interacting with content. Shao (2009) states that interacting with other users directly (i.e., user-to-user interaction) or indirectly (i.e., user-to-content interaction) fulfills social needs and contributes to the formation of online communities. Users can experience a feeling of belonging by joining groups who share beliefs and interests. For the general use of social media, the social functions of social network sites also play a prominent role. Users engage with social media in order to promote themselves, disclose their feelings, raise their self-esteem, receive social support, and interact with others (Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012; Baams, Jonas, Utz, Bos, & van der Vuurst, 2011).

Shao (2009) argues that although they are analytically treated separately, the behaviors surrounding user-generated content are in reality closely related and better understood as degrees of involvement. The uses and gratifications found for separate behaviors can thereby also apply to other degrees of involvement. For example, although social needs primarily play a role for users who engage with content or users, consuming content can also relate to belongingness and social support (Baams et al., 2011). Similarly, other studies find that information-seeking in the Internet era is not passive but a personalized and participatory activity (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). Users are not just motivated by the perceived quality of information but also by the informational utility of sharing this information with others (Bobkowski, 2015). Katz et al. (1973) define this as the social utility of news (see also McLeod & Becker, 1981; Yamamoto et al., 2017). The uses and gratifications framework thus identifies a wide spectrum of needs that drive the range of

media behaviors today and is an ideal vantage point from which to examine new media formats and the motivations surrounding them.

6.4 Political humor and infotainment

Infotainment or *soft news* encompass a variety of political late-night comedy programs driven by entertainment goals first and political information goals second (Caufield, 2008). Like Internet memes, late-night shows offer political commentary and employ humor to criticize, mock, and expose political events, issues, and persons. Shifman (2014) draws the same conclusion, describing memetic responses as “bottom-up, digital incarnations of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s agendas in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*” (p. 143).

Many such programs imitate traditional news (see Baym, 2005, 2010; Gaines, 2007) and have been suggested to replace traditional TV-news media (see Guggenheim, Kwak, & Campbell, 2011). Previous research on infotainment has therefore focused on how political comedy programs affect their audiences. Viewers are found to be more politically knowledgeable than non-viewers (Baum, 2003; Young, 2004), a relationship which is particularly strong for younger cohorts (Cao, 2008; Hollander, 2005) as well as for those with low levels of political knowledge (Brewer & Cao, 2006; Cao, 2008, 2010). Infotainment is therefore proposed to serve as a gateway for young people and other hard-to-reach audiences (Feldman & Young, 2008; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Political humor is also believed to incite viewers to further inform themselves on political topics: those who view late-night comedy also consume more traditional forms of news (Young and Tisinger, 2006). However, the amount of political information learned directly through soft news remains less than what is learned via hard news (Kim & Vishak, 2008).

Mixed results have been found for different programs. One study on the effects of *Saturday Night Live* finds a negative impact on political knowledge and voting (Pfau et al., 2005). This might be attributable to the type of humor involved: *Saturday Night Live* is known for its mockery and biting political satire (Compton, 2008). In contrast, viewers of *The Daily Show* have higher campaign knowledge than news viewers or newspaper readers (Young, 2004). Whereas Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find the audience of *The Daily Show* to be more politically distrusting toward government and news media, viewers also report higher levels of internal political efficacy—the belief that one is capable of successfully engaging with politics. Moreover, Becker (2011) finds that mere exposure to political comedy can have a positive effect on political behaviors, but suggests that more involved forms of media—such as online political humor—may have a negative effect.

Political humor in form of soft news seems to attract and affect audiences to varying degrees based on age, political knowledge, and type of humor used (Becker, 2011; Pfau et al., 2005; Young, 2004). Feldman (2013) proposes that the effect is determined not by the content itself but by the way audiences approach such content. She finds that viewers who orient to content as news or as a mix of news and entertainment invest more mental effort and, as a result, learn more than viewers who perceive the same content as solely entertaining. These findings are also supported by other studies that find that fictional or entertaining content elicit a more elaborate form of cognitive processing (Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Kim & Vishak, 2008; LaMarre & Grill, 2018; LaMarre et al., 2014). This supports the notion that when individuals consume political entertainment media with the desire for deeper meaning, they process information more thoroughly and are therefore more receptive to media effects. Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne (2007) also show that messages with highly humorous

content are more easily dismissed as irrelevant than messages with lower humorous content. Soft news programs and their ability to produce meaningful political outcomes therefore remain contested. Although soft news are primarily consumed for entertainment and thus believed not to generate the same effects as hard news, they have been found to be associated with political interest and participation (Baumgartner & Morris, 2011; Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012; Cao & Brewer, 2008; Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007).

As Feldman's (2013) study shows, a user-centered perspective is inevitable to better understand how humorous political content affects users. The same holds true for political Internet memes: research to date has focused on explicitly political and purposeful meme use and found it to be associated to a political function of Internet memes (see Shifman, 2014). However, whether the use of Internet memes can be understood as a political behavior hinges on the political intent of meme users in various contexts. Since a political behavior can only be classified as such when an individual intends it to be political (see Fitzgerald, 2013; Fox, 2014), understanding the array of motives from a user-centered perspective sheds light on Internet memes as a political phenomenon, helps us understand the role of memes in societal contexts, and enables further study of possible effects of meme use.

6.5 Overview of the study

The aim of this study is to explore the motives that drive the use of political Internet memes and the role users ascribe memes in political contexts. Since the orientation of users toward content is decisive in how it affects them, it is crucial to understand meme use and meme effects from users' perspectives. Drawing on findings from both social media and

infotainment research, this study examines the uses and gratifications sought out by users of Internet memes. This theme is expanded upon by asking users to discuss the impact they attribute to memes in political contexts. Only by learning why users seek out political Internet memes—whether they perceive them solely as entertainment or as a viable form of political engagement—can we attempt to understand memes’ relevance and role today.

6.6 Method

6.6.1 Participants

Data collection for this study consisted of two parts that were conducted in the fall of 2014 and spring of 2015. Experts of Internet memes from four countries were recruited through purposeful sampling. In addition, a student sample of typical Internet meme users was chosen in order to add more variance, complement the expert accounts, and factor in irregularities between users of different levels of involvement with memes.

The nine experts (three female, six male) participated in a three-part Delphi study. Participant criteria for the expert sample were *political interest* and *regular Internet meme use*, including creating and sharing Internet memes. The participants came from four countries: Germany (three male), the United States (one female, one male), Iceland (one female, one male), and Turkey (one female, one male). Germany and the United States both have high Internet penetration rates; in Turkey and Iceland respective social movements had taken place which included the use of Internet memes¹¹. Participants from Iceland and Turkey

¹¹ For Turkey this refers to the Gezi Park Protests, for Iceland to the Kitchenware Revolution, also known as Pots and Pans Movement. Both social movements demonstrated a strong online and offline presence, including the use of Internet memes (Jenzen & McGarry, 2017; “Occupy Savvy asks Birgitta Jonsdottir,” 2012).

were familiar with the respective movement. Additionally, sixteen undergraduate students (twelve female, four male) at an international university in Germany participated in an abridged version of the interview. The criterion for the student sample was familiarity with Internet memes. Participants with different cultural backgrounds were chosen not for the sake of conducting a country-comparison but to include a wide variety of user experiences. All participants were fluent in English; all interviews were conducted in English.

6.6.2 Procedure

The Delphi-method is a powerful tool for obtaining a consensus opinion of a group of experts and allowed us to control opinion feedback by providing questionnaires to each participant individually (Landeta, 2006). First, the nine meme experts were emailed open-ended questions and asked to record their written responses. After each round, we generated new questions from the answers of the previous round and were thus able to mediate a group discussion that focused on the motives for Internet meme use, while also accounting for participants' individual experiences. The interview guide drew on uses and gratifications that had been found for user-generated content to create the first round of interview questions. Since limited academic literature on the use of Internet memes exists, we drew on the responses of the meme experts to delve into new topics that arose during the discussions. Participants identified motives for using Internet memes and discussed the characteristics that make memes attractive or unattractive as a type of political content. They also noted the potential as well as the limitations of Internet memes for political contexts. Participants examined these particularly with regard to the impact Internet memes may have on specific social movements and on everyday political processes in their respective countries. Data were collected until answers became repetitive and satisfied the saturation criterion.

Participants of the student sample were first given time to individually fill out open-ended questions in a paper-and-pen questionnaire, then grouped into teams of four, asked to discuss their answers, and record a group answer for each question. The questionnaire was based on the expert interview guide and included all major themes discussed by the expert sample (see Appendix D for the unabridged interview guide). Although this method did not allow for the same in-depth approach of the full Delphi-method interviews, these participants could generate individual answers, exchange ideas, and form a consensus response for each question.

6.6.3 Analysis

The written responses of all participants were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012), reducing the data and focusing the analysis on the research question. The groups were not compared because the focus of this study was not on country comparisons. The analysis revealed three main themes that served as the basis for the three dimensions of the coding frame (see Tables 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4). Concept-driven strategies were used to develop the questions of the interview guide, however, all categories were based on inductive themes that emerged from the data. For the purpose of analyzing the data and reporting the results, each category is presented separately, yet in the experience of participants they are closely related.

A total of 390 codes were used. Table 6.1 indicates how often each category was coded, although limited interpretability should be attributed to these frequencies. For one, the interview guide prompted participants to discuss certain topics at length, whereas other topics naturally arose from the discussions. These may have been equally important but were not discussed as often and therefore not coded as frequently. Furthermore, the units of coding are

Table 6.1 *Frequency of Codes*

Main category	Category	Frequency
Motives	Self-expression	73
	Social Identity	62
	Entertainment	60
Potential	Strengths	77
	Societal Impact	39
	Individual Impact	36
Limitations	Shortcomings	27
	Slacktivism	16

idea units, which means that some units constitute an entire paragraph and others only a word, making a comparability of frequency counts problematic. Thus, the frequencies do not reflect how meaningful a category was to participants and only provide a rough estimate of how often a theme was addressed.

An independent coder analyzed excerpts of the data, a minimum of 10% per category, yielding an inter-rater agreement of 95%.

6.7 Results

6.7.1 Dimension 1: Motives for using Internet memes

Via an open question, participants were asked why they use Internet memes. In order to minimize a possible social desirability bias, participants were also asked for the motives

they may suspect drive other meme users. Drawing on these responses of participants and previous research, during the course of the data collection process participants were also presented with motives, typically uses and gratifications, that might also play a role for the use of Internet memes and political Internet memes. Of the many motives identified and discussed by participants, three motives stand out as primary reasons why people use Internet memes in political contexts: self-expression, social identity, and entertainment. See Table 6.2 for the coding frame for Dimension 1.

6.7.1.1 Self-expression

Participants named *self-expression* as a key motive for using Internet memes, particularly for producing or sharing content. According to participants, users share memes to show others something about what they believe.

(1) Sharing memes is about wanting to transport a message. (Benjamin¹², male, Germany)

As tools for communication, participants described Internet meme use not only as a private act of expression, but as a semi-public statement.

(2) The meme can be your personal instrument of political expression, creating a parallel to the caricature as a means for political expression in the 19th and 20th century. (Alexander, male, Germany)

Participants felt memes could be used to present a point of view to a larger audience, to spread information, raise awareness, and encourage others to take action.

¹² For reasons of confidentiality, the names provided here are pseudonyms chosen by the researchers.

Table 6.2 Coding Frame for Dimension 1

Main category	Category	Description	Comment/Example
Motives	Self-expression	The motivation to use a meme is described as the desire to express oneself, share opinions, thoughts, ideas, perspectives, or experiences, take a stand, reveal a position, create a political statement, show consent/dissent, comment on cultural norms, tell stories, spread information, or express feelings/sentiments/emotions.	Particularly relevant for users creating and sharing memes. “Using memes is basically telling other people what you think and the way you think.”
	Social Identity	The motivation to use a meme is described as wanting to identify with others. Participants experience a sense of relatedness through shared beliefs, experiences, norms, and cultural elements. The content as well as the semantics of memes can contribute to this feeling of belonging.	“Using memes strengthens identities and makes bonds to a certain community online”
	Entertainment	The motivation to use a meme is related to entertainment, fun, laughter, and enjoyment. Humor plays an important role, especially in downplaying more serious content and safeguarding against criticism.	Users creating and sharing memes want to entertain; users consuming memes want to be entertained.

(3) Sharers want to attract the attention of their friends in their networks. All have a social motivation in common as long as political memes are concerned: they maybe want to inform about a deficit, criticize and in the end change it by drawing the public attention to it. (Benjamin, male, Germany)

Participants noted that in relation to politics, a user must be compelled enough by a meme to “put their face on it” (Christopher, male, USA), an act which creates vulnerability, particularly on social media where users will likely be challenged on controversial political

topics. Internet memes allow users to walk the line between expressing a personal, political opinion, and keeping a safe distance from controversial stances.

(4) Not only do memes address something political or controversial, but they are allowed to address more politically incorrect opinions of people without the creator to be either known nor directly assaulted because of their opinions. The political incorrectness of some memes may be the reason why they become so popular. They are confronting something in society in a passive aggressive manner, perhaps with a cute picture of a polar bear or a penguin, which gives the meme a strange juxtaposition. (Erna, female, Iceland)

To participants, Internet memes constitute a tool for political self-expression that enables users to broadcast their beliefs and make themselves heard in a safe manner.

6.7.1.2 Social identity

Another motive participants cited for using Internet memes was *social identity*. Participants stated that because memes are used to express opinions, values, and emotions, they create a feeling of relatedness and belonging among users. Engaging with Internet memes can create a common understanding of a concept or situation, linking together like-minded people and fostering a sense of community.

(5) The sense of shared identity that I experience from memes is mostly related to political or social issues. When I see a friend share a meme that I agree with it provides a chance for us to bond over (presumed) values. (Sarah, female, USA)

According to participants, Internet meme users easily identify with others who share content in line with their opinions and may even be swayed to accept opposing opinions of other users through a sense of connectedness.

(6) It might make the adaption to new ideas or values more easy as they already have some shared values or identity with that group, so when someone within that identity group is sharing values which contrast the value set of an individual, the individual might be more ready to accept it or tolerate it as they have some shared identities and values to the group in general. (Erna, female, Iceland)

Participants also described cultural identity to play a role for Internet meme use: because Internet memes employ elements of popular culture and tap into pre-existing cultural identities, many come to serve as a “cultural touchstone or reference point” (Sarah, female, USA), a community emblem around which users group. Participants believe this brings people together, but also creates boundaries toward members of an out-group. One participant described how a person can be dated based on whether they know a specific meme. Another participant claimed a feeling of identity is created by excluding others who are not in-the-know.

(7) Memes are like a language in itself. They have their own grammar you have to learn. I guess one of the prime examples for this is the doge meme which—literally—has its own grammar. If you are able to speak a (rare) language, you identify with other speakers of that tongue. In my opinion this hold true for memes-as-a-language as well. (Tom, male, Germany)

Additionally, participants reported that using memes creates a sense of superiority toward members of the out-group:

(8) Sometimes it even takes some minor effort to “encrypt” the humor but once it is done there is a slight feeling of superiority that you are able to “get that joke.” (Tom, male, Germany)

(9) These memes typically proclaim something that positions the person as more of a knower than their political opponents and as a better person (e.g., a patriot, or someone who *really* understands ObamaCare). (Sarah, female, USA)

According to participants, Internet memes can contribute to a sense of identity and relatedness among users, and a sense of exclusivity and superiority toward others.

6.7.1.3 Entertainment

The discussions also focused on humor as an essential element of Internet memes, and *entertainment* as a motive to interact with humorous political content. Participants described users who consume Internet memes as looking for a laugh; users who produce and/or share Internet memes were described as wanting to make others laugh.

(10) Humor plays the biggest role. Humor is the reason why people look for new memes and continue scrolling through the page. (Zaid, male, student sample)

In the context of politics, participants noted that humor could bring people to interact with serious topics in a light-hearted way.

(11) Memes are usually fun to consume and give you a comic relief on serious subjects. This is something normal news articles often fail at. (Alexander, male, Germany)

Participants agreed that humor can be employed by people who create Internet memes in order to make political content more attractive to those looking for “quick amusement” (Tom, male, Germany). In this case, humor will be used to downplay an aggressive political point of view. This might be done to counteract the vulnerability users feel by sharing a controversial meme and taking a strong stance on a topic.

(12) If the meme is political and funny at the same time, it is more difficult to attack you on a controversial political issue. (Tom, male, Germany)

Participants described entertainment as a crucial factor in attracting viewers to Internet memes that have political content and noted the role of humor as a safeguard against criticism.

6.7.2 Dimension 2: The potential of political Internet memes

In order to gauge how influential participants themselves perceive Internet memes to be, they were asked whether they believe Internet memes a powerful and impactful political tool. During the course of the discussion, three aspects of the political potential of Internet memes emerged: characteristics that make memes successful in political contexts, the impact of memes on society at large, and the impact of memes on individuals; see Table 6.3.

6.7.2.1 Strengths of Internet memes

Participants described memes as effortless, timely, brief, and accessible, and went on to explain how this contributes to their influence.

(11) Memes perfectly fit into the consumption patterns of today’s media. In small moments of ubiquitous procrastination there is no time to read that whole article on

Table 6.3 Coding Frame for Dimension 2

Main category	Category	Description	Comment/ Example
Potential	Strengths	Memes are attributed characteristics that participants believe make them ideal for political contexts. They see these characteristics as strengths or advantages of political Internet memes.	E.g., require little effort, concise, accessible, relatable, large reach, visible, appealing, fast
	Societal Impact	Memes are described as able to impact societies. Participants describe memes as powerful in bringing people together, reflecting the concerns of the masses, and enhancing protest and social change.	“Memes can have the power to raise attention on certain social, economical, political issues in the broader public.”
	Individual Impact	Memes are described as able to impact individuals. Participants describe memes as changing people’s thinking and motivating them to take further action.	“Memes can influence people’s attitudes or beliefs”

The Guardian. However, there is enough time to get the key message of that specific meme. (Tom, male, Germany)

(12) Someone who looks at a meme may not even be interested. Many viewers of memes are only such because the memes show up on their news feed. (Christopher, male, USA)

Another participant described Internet memes as the “fast food of the Internet” (Erna, female, Iceland), offering instant gratification to users. All participants agreed that Internet memes represent ideas in a way that requires little effort from those involved; they can be

created quickly and without much work, shared and curated on virtually all platforms, and remixed with other content to remain pervasive.

(13) I think any way of delivering an idea, message or a joke that is brief, to the point and understandable by everyone has a certain power. (Melek, female, Turkey)

The accessibility of Internet memes makes them an ideal medium to deliver a message, create awareness, and shape public discourse. Participants described these characteristics as advantages for Internet memes when they appear in political contexts.

6.7.2.2 Societal impact

Participants linked Internet memes to societal impact by explaining that they reflect the views of the masses. Users of Internet memes hold the proverbial mirror up to all members of society: politicians, government, organizations, corporations, and even themselves, by criticizing and mocking events and issues.

(14) I think that Internet memes present the perspective of society toward social events and responsible parties. (Hasan, male, Turkey)

The power of Internet memes was seen to lie in them as the voice of the people, as an element of democracy.

(15) I have never seen a meme created by the government. So basically, the power is held by the society over the government. (Hasan, male, Turkey)

Although astroturfed¹³ and commercialized memes were also touched upon, participants mostly described Internet memes as a phenomenon of the masses, a powerful political tool for everyday citizens.

(16) Nobody who has seriously studied political upheavals in the West for the past two hundred years or so can dismiss the impact of posters and pamphlets. It would be naïve at best to think that the hundreds of thousands of participants in the November revolution arrived at their position through painstaking research and reading through essays and books. No; simple slogans that resonated with their experiences are almost certainly what bonded the mutineers in Kiel. Memes are unquestionably related to such factors; the popularity of political posters from the Golden Age of the art form as bases for meme images is *prima facie* evidence of the connection, however satirical the intent. (Tómas, male, Iceland)

As such, participants understood Internet memes as a tool for enhancing protest and provoking social change. Asked whether they believe Internet memes to effectuate meaningful, real-world change, participants questioned the notion that online activities are not real-world activities.

(17) Online happenings are a part of real life. I don't think that sharing memes and interacting online are an illusionary means of exerting influence. (Sarah, female, USA)

¹³ Astroturfed memes have become more frequent as organizations feign grassroots support through the use of Internet memes; see Ratkiewicz et al. (2010) for more information.

(18) I guess this could not be answered without a long discussion as what is real and unreal. But if we look at the Guttenplag/Vroniplag case¹⁴, online activism and memes ended up in the downfall of one of our ministers. I think this is pretty real. (Tom, male, Germany)

Participants characterized Internet memes as an effective way for individuals to take influence on societies by shaping public discourse, setting new agendas, and contributing to the spread of information.

6.7.2.3 Individual impact

When participants addressed the impact Internet memes could have on individuals, the discussion centered on memes shaping people's way of thinking.

(19) Whether in picture form or text, memes structure thinking; they can serve as mental categories, whether for people or for behaviors. (Tómas, male, Iceland)

Through their omnipresence online, Internet memes can sway people to take on different perspectives and rethink an already formed position.

(20) I do believe that one can learn something from interacting with memes. They can change your point of view and make you rethink your own position, as well as think about the topic of the meme. (Benjamin, male, Germany)

¹⁴ GuttenPlag is a crowd-source wiki whose contributors documented plagiarism in the doctoral thesis of the German political figure Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg. The wiki played a role in the plagiarism scandal which ultimately led to Guttenberg's resignation. VroniPlag is a successor wiki with the same aim and to date has contributed to the disqualification of doctoral titles of seven German politicians.

Participants suggested that Internet memes may also motivate individuals to take action.

(21) If memes are short and concise, the reader connects them with this topic and is motivated through them to inform themselves more about the topic or to get involved in the solution of the addressed problem. (Benjamin, male, Germany)

(22) A well-constructed meme can influence people's voting behavior or other ways of supporting a political issue. (Sarah, female, USA)

Participants believe that Internet memes can influence the thoughts, opinions and attitudes of users, and potentially create more interest in a topic. Some also ventured the guess that this could contribute to behavioral changes, by spurring political engagement online and offline.

6.7.3 Dimension 3: The limitations of political Internet memes

While participants stated that Internet memes could impact societies and individuals, they qualified these statements by noting the limitations of Internet memes; the characteristics of memes that make them unfit for political contexts; see Table 6.4.

6.7.3.1 Shortcomings of Internet memes

Participants described Internet memes as superficial, manipulative, and oversimplifying the truth.

(23) It is amazing how people will eagerly share a meme that has very little text or depth but is catchy in some way. (Sarah, female, USA)

Participants noted that many memes cater to the masses, who search for simple answers and easy solutions.

Table 6.4 Coding Frame for Dimension 3

Main category	Category	Description	Comment/Example
Limitations	Shortcomings	Memes are attributed characteristics that participants believe make them ill fit for political contexts. They see these characteristics as shortcomings or disadvantages of political Internet memes.	E.g. superficial, manipulative, oversimplifying, not verifiable, propaganda
	Slacktivism	Memes are described as unable to have a meaningful impact on society or individuals, possibly even deterring meme users from taking political action.	“Meme use is a quite superficial action, not doing anything about the real problem.”

(24) I guess political memes serve many people’s search for simplification and simple and concise answers to complex questions. Somehow the same reason why caricatures or even conspiracy theories are that popular. (Tom, male, Germany)

Participants also touched upon the fact that Internet memes can manipulate users because the content is not easily verified and misinformation can be spread through oversimplified statements.

(25) Of course every time something is shortened, concise, exaggerated and somehow humorous there is a risk of manipulation, especially in the media. That is because the whole truth is complex and not as easy as it could be presented in a meme. (Benjamin, male, Germany)

Participants agreed that Internet memes are too short to fully capture complex socio-political issues.

6.7.3.2 *Slacktivism*

During the discussion on the impact of Internet memes on political processes, the interview guide introduced the concept of slacktivism, providing participants with a definition and asking them to discuss whether they believe Internet memes inhibit or foster political engagement. Some participants replied that slacktivism could be problematic.

(26) Sometimes people do get caught up in signing petitions and talking online and don't translate that into other action, which is a problem. (Sarah, female, USA)

One participant noted that the highly reactive environment of user-generated content and the process of creating an Internet meme could already provide a user with a feeling of satisfaction.

(27) There is a sense of satisfaction that comes from seeing others view and share your work, it validates your effort and the sentiment you think is important to express. I think there is also something inherently agentive in the act of creation, even in creating something as simple as a meme. You are still constructing something that is treated as valuable by some people, this is bound to provide some sense of satisfaction. (Sarah, female, USA)

However, instead of seeing Internet memes to replace political action, participants suggested that they go hand-in-hand with other forms of action. For example, Internet memes could be the online counterpart to an offline protest.

(28) I think clicktivism [*another term for slacktivism*] supports the concrete effort. Sometimes the news, the event, etc. spread faster with online actions. So in this case, the protest is the cause of the political meme. (Hasan, male, Turkey)

Internet memes were described as playing a supporting role for political participation and social movements.

(29) Memes do not substitute for other political activity. They can function as the glue for an otherwise active movement, or as the catalyst for the formation of a movement, but they cannot take the place of a movement. (Tómas, male, Iceland)

Participants were unsure how much impact using Internet memes has, but rather than agreeing that using memes enhances slacktivism, participants saw Internet memes as supporting other forms of political action.

6.8 Discussion

The user-centered research design allowed for the identification of three main motives that drive Internet meme use: self-expression, social identity, and entertainment. Participants reported that they believe in the political efficacy of memes, but at the same time critically reflected on their limited scope as a full-fledged form of political engagement.

This study finds that, compared to all other motives, meme consumers are mainly drawn to political Internet memes for entertainment. Two aspects make the entertainment motive relevant for the political context. First, Internet memes present content in an enjoyable way and thereby introduce users who are primarily interested in entertainment to more serious topics. Particularly for those users who struggle with weighty news topics, humor can provide relief and make political content more pleasurable. Similar to other forms of infotainment, Internet memes reportedly provide a gateway to political topics. These findings thus support Shifman's (2014) notion that political Internet memes are conceptually similar to soft news

programs, offering easy access to light-hearted political content and making news topics more appealing.

Further, participants reported that particularly humorous political Internet memes incentivize users to deepen their political knowledge. Internet memes are not searched out primarily to learn about politics, but to learn what *the Internet* is talking about. Users search out additional information on topics when they feel these are interesting to a great number of people. Political memes hereby fulfill the social utility of news (see Katz et al., 1973; McLeod & Becker, 1981; Yamamoto et al., 2017): gaining or deepening political knowledge happens as a side effect to the consumption of entertaining Internet memes. It may be a promising avenue for further memetics research to draw on the audience effects of infotainment as a starting point for the possible effects of using entertaining political Internet memes, particularly with regard to political interest and political knowledge.

The second central motive for users to search out political Internet memes was the wish for creators to express themselves. This goes in line with previous findings, which have continuously identified self-expression as a reason why users produce and share content (see Leung, 2009; Meyers, 2012; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Participants in this study reported that because Internet memes are quick and effortless to create and disseminate, they are an accessible way for users to share their views, values, and feelings about a number of topics. Specifically political Internet memes can satisfy a user's wish to contribute to a topical political debate, by making involvement with politics easier than conventional, resource-intensive forms of political engagement, which tend to require a certain amount of political knowledge and commitment (see Vitak et al., 2011). The memetic format thus provides a low-

barrier entry for individuals who wish to more actively engage with political topics. Whether this behavior also relates to high-barrier political engagement is questionable.

Finally, participants noted that political Internet memes, by default, are always situated in highly social contexts and remarked that this motivates their use of memes. The reactivity of social news websites enhances the user-experience because it provides them with a sense of social identity. Research on social media has always highlighted the need of users to interact with and connect to others, to present themselves and receive recognition for doing so (Baams et al., 2011; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Utz et al., 2012). The participants of this study likewise reported that they search out Internet memes for social interactions. Additionally, political Internet memes allow them to identify and relate to users who hold similar worldviews. These accounts are in line with literature on Social Identity Theory whereby individuals derive a sense of social identity from perceived membership in a relevant social group. Behavior on part of the individual is then guided by this identity, as individuals will strive to conform to the norms of the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The recurring memetic elements—image macros, templates, and pop-culture references—hereby function as a *meme language* and provide common ground for users from various backgrounds (see also Hartley, 2010; Leavitt, 2014). Milner (2013a) describes these elements as “vernacular fixity” (p. 2) and proposes that this pre patterning “affords depth and expression” (p. 3) as memes function as a lingua franca. He posits that this “common language” allows users to “have discussions spanning vast geography” (Milner, 2013a, p. 5). Accordingly, participants of this study proposed that meme users are also more likely to be swayed by an opposing view on the basis of these shared experiences. Hence, we might infer that the identity motive can be supportive of users’ political aspirations by providing a community of like-minded individuals in which users are

more trusting of one another and therefore can more easily engage in meaningful political discussions.

The three motives derived from the qualitative content analysis can be treated as individual reasons for political meme use. In reality, however, motives to engage with user-generated content tend to be intertwined. A study by Edgerly, Thorson, Bighash, & Hannah (2016) finds that individuals who wish to broadcast political information on social media platforms rarely do so devoid of personal opinion. Users prefer to share opinion pieces and links to analyses sites rather than neutral news articles. The authors conclude that the hybridity of personal broadcast and political expression is of great importance to users who wish to share political content. This may also hold true for political Internet memes: the motives identified in this study do not provide separate avenues for the use of memes but heavily rely on each other. First, the desire for users to self-express works in tandem with the entertainment motive as exemplified by users' belief that they are less vulnerable to criticism when they express a political opinion through an entertaining Internet meme. Humor, in addition to attracting meme consumers, also plays the role of safeguarding the creators of Internet memes who wish to disseminate a political opinion. Second, the social utility of memes as news works by way of users wanting to understand what makes a joke enjoyable to others: users are thus incentivized to seek out more information on an issue when a humorous meme goes viral. Here, the entertainment and identity motives converge to enhance political learning. Finally, users searching for identity are provided with a safe environment, which may encourage more profound political debate and therefore enhance users' wish to self-express. The perception of a shared experience with other users may be even further supported by the entertainment function: humor can play a prominent role in relationship

formation and maintenance because a shared sense of humor increases perceived similarity (Utz, 2015).

In conclusion, political Internet memes provide users with a comfortable and playful way of self-expressing political opinions. Using Internet memes is governed by the three motives *self-expression*, *social identity*, and *entertainment*, as well as by the interplay between them. These motives do not compete with a desire for political engagement; instead, they seem to support further political aspirations.

To turn to the impact of political Internet memes: the way meme users characterize Internet memes is likely indicative of memes' role in the political realm. Participants in this study agreed that individuals who are politically interested can make use of Internet memes for political purposes because memes lend themselves well to these contexts. Their short slogans, easy access, large audiences, and flexible areas of application make them an optimal tool for raising awareness about a topic. At the same time, memes cannot offer a comprehensive overview of a political issue. Participants characterized Internet memes as propaganda tools, which can easily be employed to manipulate users through superficial and sensationalist statements. Internet memes also tend to exclude those who are not privy to the meme language. The exclusivity of Internet memes strengthens the bonds of group members, but simultaneously creates divides for outsiders. This finding goes in line with a structural analysis of Internet memes by Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017), which describes the subcultural knowledge that is required to successfully use memes as a gatekeeping practice. Internet memes, although technically accessible to everyone, practically exclude those users who are not well-versed in the respective subcultures. This construction of out-groups is a further key element of Social Identity Theory; individuals who identify with members of their

social group will perceive members of an out-group as dissimilar to themselves, and for the sake of maintaining a cohesive group, exclude these members from their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In our case, participants found the exclusion of non-meme users to be critical element of Internet memes and were thus hesitant in describing Internet memes as a democratic tool for everyone.

In addition to characterizing Internet memes, participants also explicitly addressed how memes might affect politics. The impact radius of most Internet memes is confined to localized online spheres and participants found that Internet memes generally do not impact society. There are, however, instances when Internet memes create enough commotion to find their way into the news media, reaching large audiences beyond the digital realm and shaping national discussions. In some cases, Internet memes can provide the opportunity for individuals to participate in a public sphere that reaches beyond specific online communities, although most saw this as the exception rather than the rule. In their discussions, participants therefore placed more emphasis on how Internet memes affect individual users. Because this study focused on the experience of users, it cannot speak to any measurable effects of Internet memes—measuring the political efficacy of Internet memes is reserved for future meme research. However, from the findings some ideas on memes' possible impact as discussed by participants themselves can be pioneered.

Users who perceive Internet memes solely as entertaining are likely not interested in engaging with politics and therefore mostly seek out apolitical Internet memes. They may peripherally and sporadically come into contact with political topics through Internet memes. For these users, Internet memes can provide a gateway to politics in that using them can incite more interest in political topics, although further studies would need to test this assumption. A

consideration of political interest in future studies might provide clearer indication of the motives for political meme use.

For users who mainly orient to Internet memes as political, they provide a useful tool for personal, political self-expression. Users who specifically seek out and actively employ Internet memes for political purposes are likely interested in politics, and possibly also politically active in other ways. We might therefore ask why they turn to Internet memes as a form of political activity and whether Internet memes contribute to, enhance, or possibly replace other means of political participation. Here, further research could examine the relationship of Internet meme use to an array of other political behaviors.

For users who turn to Internet memes during a social movement, the surge of using political user-generated content may be strong but short-lived. It supports the notion that a “meme movement” (Hristova, 2014) can create a banner under which further political activities can be realized, although the life and impact of such a meme movement is usually temporary and restricted to specific political contexts. A valuable contribution to research on political Internet memes in social movements might include a focus on the politically mobilizing potential of social online communities and the content generated and used by them (see Vettehen, Troost, Boerboom, Steijaert, & Scheepers, 2017).

The majority of political meme activity likely stems from users who orient to political Internet memes as a type of playful political content, using memes to stay updated on politically unfolding events. For these users, effortlessly engaging with political Internet memes may well be related to other *light* forms of digital political engagement (see Shifman et al., 2007; Strømsnes, 2009). Here, future research could look more closely at political attitudes of meme users, as well as on unconventional forms of political participation.

The results show that users critically reflect on their use of Internet memes in politics. Most participants proposed that although memes play a supportive role, using political Internet memes does not by itself constitute meaningful political engagement and cannot take the place of other forms of political participation. However, users also pointed out that new forms of political participation should not be underestimated or undervalued. Online actions themselves can be meaningful and powerful, providing users with new ways to exert influence on the political realm. Although the study of political Internet memes is valuable in its own right, this area of research would profit from a more thorough integration with contemporary findings on political engagement and infotainment.

6.9 Limitations

The exploratory study demonstrates a number of limitations. First, it relies on self-report measures which are subject to an array of cognitive biases; participants of this study may not have been aware of all factors that play into their use of Internet memes. Although the study specifically focused on exploring the perspectives and experiences of participants, users may be led by unknown mechanisms that this design cannot capture. Participants may also have been influenced by social desirability bias, which may have been minimized by asking participants to describe users in general. Nevertheless, participants could easily have omitted unfavorable information about themselves. For this reason, self-presentation, reputation, and impression management may not have featured as prominent motives for the use of Internet memes, although they have previously been found for other types of user-generated content (see Krämer & Winter, 2008; Utz et al., 2012).

A further limitation results from the small sample size. A sample was chosen to include extreme and typical cases, meme producers as well as consumers, individuals who encountered Internet memes in social movements as well as everyday contexts, and users with different nationalities. Yet these participants do not reflect the experiences of all users. Specifically memes for democratic subversion may provide very different political uses in authoritarian regimes (Gessen, 2018; Lugg, 2013; Rea, 2013; Shifman, 2014, pp. 144). This study does not claim generalizability and instead proposes future research to consider the unique role of Internet memes in a variety of settings.

6.10 Conclusion

This study constitutes a first step in understanding how Internet meme use relates to political life and whether users perceive their actions as political. Based on the findings of this study, the use of Internet memes can neither be classified a full-fledged form of political engagement, nor be dismissed as just-for-fun. Internet memes serve an array of political uses, particularly for those users seeking out an effortless way to playfully participate in public discourse. Internet memes do not at all times meaningfully contribute to a political discourse, but under specific circumstances can provide a meaningful way for users to be involved in political causes.

7 Study 2: Antecedents and consequences of political Internet meme use

With the decline in conventional political behaviors and rise in participatory media, the nature of political citizen engagement has undergone a fundamental shift, and political Internet memes as a way for users to participate in the public sphere is providing a relevant area of research. At present it is not clear how the use of political Internet memes relates to users' political attitudes and behaviors. To fill this gap, the following survey study ($N=333$) measures political interest, political trust, political efficacy, and political participation of meme users. The hierarchical regression analyses reveal that political interest and political meme efficacy significantly predict the use of political Internet memes. The use of political Internet memes, in turn, significantly predicts conventional and unconventional forms of political participation. The findings delineate the use of political Internet memes as a political behavior and further our understanding of the role of Internet memes for the political realm.

7.1 Introduction

Since the inception of the Internet, the link between political life online and offline has spurred academic curiosity (Vettehen et al., 2017). Optimists hoped that the Internet would provide a democratic space through which individuals could more easily participate (Papacharissi, 2002), while skeptics pointed out that the majority of online activities were dedicated to entertainment rather than political discourse (Gandy, 2002). Most studies to date have found a positive relationship between the use of social media and political participation or civic engagement (Boulianne, 2015; Copeland, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Stanley & Weare, 2004; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). However, entertaining political user-generated content has not been accorded the same attention as other

forms of political content, and it is less clear whether its use spurs or inhibits political engagement. Particularly the rise of Internet memes as a contemporary political phenomenon (Ross & Rivers, 2017) warrants further investigation. In order to understand how the use of Internet memes relates to political life, the current study explores the political attitudes and behaviors of Internet meme users by means of survey data.

Internet memes are defined as “multimodal symbolic artifacts created, circulated, and transferred by countless mediated cultural participants” (Milner, 2013b, p. 2359). Political memes communicate beliefs, attitudes and orientations, and are a tool to criticize, deride and mock political figures, in form and stance related to political entertainment and satire (Plevriti, 2013). They are thus a way for users to playfully engage with politics (Tully & Ekdale, 2014). Political Internet memes appear in most election campaigns and protest movements today (Milner, 2013b), but also constitute a form of everyday politics whereby they are used to make sense of unfolding events (Highfield, 2016b). Users employ political Internet memes as a tool for political expression (Birkhead, 2016; Plevriti, 2013) and to bring people together to rally under a common idea (Hristova, 2014). Since political Internet memes frequently include entertaining elements and deviate from traditional political content, the ramifications of Internet meme use on political processes are still unclear. Exploratory research, like the interview study presented in Chapter 6, has proposed that political Internet memes might function as a gateway, in support of political knowledge and political behavior. Users understand their use of Internet memes as a political activity, although they are cautious about it being sufficient for political change. Especially the simplification of complex social issues stands in the way of Internet meme use fully substituting for political activities. As we learned from the interview study, users instead propose that using political Internet memes

encourages other forms of political engagement. To test whether these findings hold up under quantitative scrutiny, this study examines an array of political attitudes and behaviors in relation to the use of political Internet memes.

7.2 Political participation

One of the most frequently studied forms of political behavior is political participation, defined as all actions of citizens with the intent or effect of influencing government action (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). Political participation traditionally encompasses electoral behaviors, work for political parties, contacting public officials, attending political meetings, protesting behaviors, and sometimes also civic engagement, such as participating in voluntary associations (Dalton, 2008; Lilleker, 2016; Macedo et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Over the years, political participation has changed, with some scholars insisting that it has declined with the rise of the Internet (Putnam, 2000). Also known as the slacktivism or clicktivism hypothesis, social media are seen to absorb political activity, and to inhibit political participation as the Internet is primarily used for entertainment and other feel-good activities (Christensen, 2011; Putnam, 1995, 2000). Yet studies devoted to the evolution of political behavior find that political participation is shifting rather than decreasing (Dalton, 2008, 2013; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). While certain behaviors such as voting and party membership have indeed decreased (Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russel, 2007; Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012), others are on the rise. Engaging in lawful demonstrations increased at times, as did petition signing, culture jamming, transnational activism, and participation in rallies, boycotts, and social movements (Bennett & Segerberg,

2012; Dalton, 2006; Loader et al., 2014; Micheletti & McFarland, 2011; Norris, 2002).

Simultaneously, the patterns of political participation have expanded to encompass new, unconventional behaviors. Unconventional political participation is defined as all political behaviors not necessarily directed at the state (Barnes et al., 1979; Fox, 2014; van Deth, 2014). This includes but is not limited to political consumerism (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005), citizen journalism (Campbell, 2015; Domingo et al., 2008; Goode, 2009; Holton et al., 2013), and political micro-blogging (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2012), which have rapidly increased in recent years. Likewise, the use of social media for political deliberation and discourse has experienced a tremendous surge (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). Rather than speak of a decline in political participation, it seems that our understanding of which behaviors constitute modern political participation is challenged by new behaviors which emerge through converging societies and the use of new technologies (Copeland, 2013; Davis et al., 2018).

The notion that the Internet harms democracies has largely been laid to rest, yet the decline of some conventional forms of political participation and the simultaneous rise of new forms of political engagement indeed necessitate a re-evaluation of political behaviors. Many unconventional behaviors are now understood as less alternative than initially thought and rather seen as extensions to traditional participatory behaviors (Strømsnes, 2009). Others argue that digitally networked participation, including behaviors such as commenting on social media about political or social issues, manifests as a distinct mode of participation, independent from offline acts but also from other online acts that may mirror offline behaviors (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). This spread of expressive modes

of participation has sparked debate and research on online political participation. Yet, in such research, the use of *entertaining* political user-generated content such as political Internet memes has still not been systematically investigated in relation to political participation. As Shifman et al. (2007) conclude in their analysis of online humor during the 2005 UK general election: humor encourages participation but paradoxically also frames politics as a cynical game, “leaving the rationale for political participation unclear” (p. 465; see also Davis et al., 2018).

This study aims to explore the relationship of political Internet meme use to political participation. Since previous qualitative research suggests that meme use supplements or even incites further political activities, this study hypothesizes a positive relationship between political Internet meme use and political participation. In line with the changing nature of political participation, this relationship is expected to be strongest for unconventional political participation.

7.3 Political interest

Political interest has been described as the most powerful predictor of political behaviors (Prior, 2010) and is found in most politically active citizens (Verba et al., 1995, p. 345). Unlike conventional political participation, political interest has not experienced a decline, although lower levels of political interest are typically found in younger generations (Farthing, 2010). Because political interest overall remains rather low in most Western societies, the shift of political behaviors to the online realm has spurred suspicion about citizens becoming politically disillusioned through the use of social media (Loader et al., 2014).

Typically, political interest is measured by assessing how frequently individuals participate in political discussions with friends, the assumption being that only politically interested individuals voluntarily seek out politics in their free time. It is therefore conceptually related to political involvement and political talk (van Deth & Elff, 2004). Political interest tends to be stable over the life course, meaning that it is a potential that can be tapped into in order to mobilize citizen involvement (Prior, 2010; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013). But because political interest is formed at a young age, young social media users may still be influenced by the use of online content. For example, Lupia and Philpot (2005) show that greater political interest is reported after respondents use specific types of websites; this effect is strongest for younger cohorts.

Due to its overall stability, political interest is predominantly treated as a predictor or control variable. Studies show that the relationship between political online content and traditional participation is stronger for those with higher political interest (Xenos & Moy, 2007). They also find that attempts to mobilize citizens to engage in politics are more successful on those who are politically interested to begin with (Finkel, 2002). Becker and Copeland (2016) conclude that connective social media use reinforces the civic and political participation of those with high political interest. Political interest can thus be understood as contingent to political behavior, and relevant for the relationship between social media use and political participation (Boulianne, 2009, 2015).

It is then not the use of social media that directly affects political participation; rather social media platforms provide the possibility for citizens to voice their concerns and become involved in a cause, provided they are politically interested. Political Internet memes are one way in which individuals believe they can politically engage by expressing personal, political

convictions and raising awareness about social causes. Assuming that the use of political Internet memes in the eyes of meme users constitutes a political act, we might expect the use of political Internet memes to be predicted by political interest. The following study will therefore first test the predictive power of political interest on the use of political Internet memes.

7.4 Political efficacy and trust

Political efficacy is another frequently used measure of political attitudes and key indicator of political participation. Originally, it was defined as an individual's perception that political action can have an impact on political processes, determining whether an individual feels it is worthwhile to politically engage (Craig, 1979). It has also been termed "citizens' perceptions of powerfulness in the political realm" (Morrell, 2003, p. 589). The unidimensional conceptualization of political efficacy was later divided into internal and external political efficacy. Internal political efficacy refers to beliefs about one's own competence to participate in politics, whereas external political efficacy constitutes the belief in a system's responsiveness to citizen demands (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990). As external political efficacy taps into the belief about a system, it is closely related to political trust, which Craig (1979) defines as "the anticipated quality of government outputs" (p. 229).

Political trust itself is not a strong predictor of political behavior, but taken together with political efficacy can predict different forms of political participation. Pollock (1983) writes, "efficacy affects the level of initiative required by the act, and trust structures its allegiant or nonallegiant nature" (p. 400). In other words, when citizens are distrustful of a political system (i.e., do not believe political output has citizens' best interests at heart), but

high in politically efficacy (i.e., believe they are capable of engaging with and able to influence politics), they will likely turn to alternative forms of political participation.

Although nonallegiant or elite-challenging political activity is not identical to unconventional political participation, both follow the idea that active citizenry is not tied to traditional forms of political participation. Dalton and Welzel (2014) suggest that nonallegiant individuals do not reject democracy, yet are frequently disillusioned about the democratic process, experience a decline in trustful orientations, and are therefore more likely to participate in protests, boycotts, and other contentious actions.

Assessing the perceived political efficacy of using political Internet memes will provide a better understanding of how users themselves view their engagement. If the use of Internet memes is to be understood as a political behavior, it must be driven by the desire to be politically engaged, and by the belief that this engagement is powerful. I therefore propose that the belief that Internet memes are politically impactful will predict the use of Internet memes for political purposes.

Furthermore, because political efficacy and political trust together predict which type of political participation citizens engage in, this study also assesses the political trust of Internet meme users. Research on nonallegiant political participation has shown that distrust and political efficacy are indicators of contentious political behavior. Based on the findings of the previous chapter identifying the use of political Internet memes as a political activity that could support other political behaviors, it is likely that Internet meme use constitutes a supplementary form of everyday political activity, rather than a contentious political action. We would then not expect the use of political Internet memes to be driven by cynicism

(political distrust), nor for the use of political Internet memes to replace conventional political participation.

7.5 Overview of the study

In research on changing political engagement, political Internet meme use and its relationship to political attitudes and behaviors has not yet been empirically examined. The current study examines possible antecedents and consequences of political Internet meme use.

The first research question asks whether political interest relates to the use of political Internet memes. If political interest predicts the use of political Internet memes, this would allow us to understand a possible political motive behind meme use. The second research question asks for the perceived political efficacy of Internet memes as a predictor of political meme use. A positive relationship, as hypothesized, would give indication of how impactful users perceive political Internet memes to be. The third research question relates to political trust, and its corresponding hypothesis proposes that meme use is not related to political distrust. This would signify the use of political Internet memes as a form of everyday politics rather than a contentious, nonallegiant political behavior. The last research question concerns the relationship between meme use and political behavior. The hypothesis proposes that using political Internet memes does not inhibit political participation and instead shows a positive relationship to both conventional as well as unconventional political behaviors. In line with research on the changing nature of political participation, a stronger relationship between political meme use and unconventional participation is expected.

7.6 Method

7.6.1 Participants and procedure

The sample comprised 151 US-American and 182 German participants (215 female, 109 male¹⁵). The two countries were chosen to include more variance of political attitudes and behaviors and because both countries have high Internet penetration rates; a country-comparison was not the focus of this study. Participants were recruited via university mailing lists and social media platforms and completed an online survey. Completion of the survey took 5 to 10 minutes, participants received no compensation for participating. Participants' mean age was 32 years ($SD = 10.8$), 79% reported to have obtained a university degree.

7.6.2 Measures

The measures *Meme use*, *Political meme use*, and *Political meme efficacy* were created for this experiment. The measures *Political interest*, *Conventional political participation*, *Unconventional political participation*, and *Political trust* came from cross-national survey. A comprehensive overview of all measures and items can be found in Appendix E.

Meme use assesses the frequency of several Internet meme-related behaviors (four items, e.g., "I share Internet memes," 1 = never, 4 = always, $\alpha = .78$).

Political meme use is measured on a 5-point scale ("I am interested in Internet memes that are political," 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

¹⁵ This question was optional so as not to exclude individuals who do not identify along a binary gender spectrum. I deemed it necessary to include this measure because gender bias persists among many online communities (Rankin, 2018; Solon, 2017).

Political meme efficacy refers to the perceived impact Internet memes have on politics, (four items, e.g., “Memes can affect the opinions of voters,” 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree, $\alpha = .72$).

Political interest uses item V84 from the World Values Survey Wave 6 (2010–2014), (“How interested would you say you are in politics?” 1 = not at all interested, 4 = very interested).

Conventional political participation uses items B11–B17 from ESS Round 6: European Social Survey (2012), (seven items, e.g., “During the last 12 months, have you contacted a politician, government or local government official?” 0 = no, 1 = yes, $\alpha = .66$).

Unconventional political participation uses items B22–B24 from ESS Round 1: European Social Survey (2002), adding four additional items assessing political participation online, (seven items, e.g., “During the last 12 months, have you shared on social media that you have participated in an election?” 0 = no, 1 = yes, $\alpha = .57$).

Political trust assesses confidence in various institutions using items B2–B8 from ESS Round 6: European Social Survey (2012), adding an additional item to assess trust in the media (seven items, e.g., “How much do you personally trust the legal system?” 0 = no trust, 10 = complete trust, $\alpha = .93$).

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables can be found in Appendix F. All variables used in subsequent analyses were standardized using z scores. For measures using multiple items, composite variables were computed using the mean.

Table 7.1 *Descriptive Statistics for Socio-demographics, Political Behaviors and Attitudes*

Gender and country	male USA	female USA	male Germany	female Germany
Education	.308 ^a	.369 ^{ac}	-.042 ^d	-.420 ^b
Political interest	.166 ^a	.079 ^a	.345 ^a	-.373 ^b
Unconventional political participation	.133	.357 ^a	-.190 ^b	-.295 ^b
Conventional political participation	.038	.125	.012	-.175
Political trust	-.616 ^a	-.583 ^a	.623 ^b	.442 ^b
Political meme efficacy	.071	.074	-.163	-.040
Meme use	.218	.004	.049	-.179
Political meme use	-.066	-.008	.053	.033

Note. ^a Group differs statistically significantly at $p < .05$ from type (in row) where ^b is indicated, based on Games-Howell; ^c Group differs statistically significantly at $p < .05$ from type (in row) where ^d is indicated, based on Games-Howell.

7.7 Results

7.7.1 Gender and country differences

Table 7.1 shows descriptive statistics using multivariate analysis of variance to test gender and country differences in means for all variables. Several variables reveal significant differences. US-American participants hold higher educational degrees than German participants¹⁶. *Political interest* is significantly lower in German females than German males

¹⁶ German participants were predominantly recruited via public Facebook groups whereas US-participants were recruited via university mailing lists and snowball sampling. This may account for lower levels of education in German participants.

or US-American participants¹⁷. *Unconventional political participation* shows clear country differences, as does *Political trust*, with German participants less involved in unconventional means of political participation and reporting higher levels of trust in institutional organizations¹⁸. Due to these differences, *Gender*, *Country*, and *Education* are included as control variables in all further analyses.

7.7.2 Internet meme use and political attitudes

For this study, three sets of regressions were calculated. The first set examines meme use as a dependent variable, the second and third examine meme use as an independent variable. In the first set of regressions, meme use is modelled as a behavioral outcome of political attitudes.

Table 7.2 shows the results of this hierarchical multiple regression analysis. *Political interest*, *Political meme efficacy*, and *Political trust* are entered as predictor variables of *Political meme use*, while controlling for demographics and general use of Internet memes. Since hierarchical regression allows for each relationship to be tested independent of the others, this approach provided a nuanced understanding of the political attitudes that drive the use of political Internet memes.

Demographics were entered in Step 1 and explain 0.4% of the variance in *Political meme use*. Meme use was entered in Step 2 and explain 8.8% of the variance; *Political interest* was entered in Step 3 and explains an additional 15.4% of the variance. In Step 4,

¹⁷ Gender gaps in political interest are predominantly found in relation to education differences (see Bennett & Bennett, 1989); this may explain the gender difference in political interest for German participants.

¹⁸ Trust in institutions has been steadily declining in the United States for several years, see Pew Research Center (2015).

Table 7.2 Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Political Meme Use

Predictor variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Gender	.012	.060	.140**	.121*	.120*
Country	.051	.095	.112*	.151**	.193**
Education	.060	.097	-.002	.050	.060
Meme use		.303***	.306***	.262***	.272***
Political interest			.414***	.388***	.389***
Political meme efficacy				.346***	.346***
Political trust					-.070
R^2	.004	.092	.246	.360	.363
R^2 Adjusted	-.006	.080	.233	.347	.348
R^2 change	.004	.088***	.154***	.115***	.003

Note. * indicates $p < 0.05$; ** indicates $p < 0.01$; *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

Political meme efficacy was entered and explains 11.5% of the variance. After entry of *Confidence in institutions* in Step 5, an insignificant R^2 change of 0.3% is recorded. The total variance explained by the final model is 36.3%, $F(7, 293) = 23.899$, $p < .001$, R^2 Adjusted = .348, with all predictors except *Confidence in institutions* being statistically significant. *Political meme efficacy* records the highest beta value, closely followed by *Political interest* (see Table 7.2).

The general use of memes significantly predicts *Political meme use*, which is expected when considering that political memes are a subset of Internet memes. As hypothesized, the

Table 7.3 *Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Conventional Political Participation*

Predictor variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	-.035	.044	.034
Country	-.058	-.042	-.050
Education	.154*	.055	.059
Political interest		.415***	.366***
Political meme use			.117*
R^2	.034	.188	.200
R^2 Adjusted	.025	.177	.186
R^2 change	.034	.154***	.012*

Note. * indicates $p < 0.05$; ** indicates $p < 0.01$; *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

final model shows that being politically interested and believing Internet memes to be politically efficacious, significantly predict the use of political Internet memes. Unlike hypothesized, however, *Confidence in institutions* is not a predictor of *Political meme use*. *Gender* and *Country* show moderate interaction effects; they only become significant in Step 3 when *Political interest* is added to the model, mirroring the findings of the preliminary analysis which revealed country and gender differences of *Political interest*.

7.7.3 Internet meme use and political participation

Now we turn to meme use as a predictor of political behavior. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis tested the predictive power of *Political meme use* on *Conventional political participation*, controlling for *Political interest* as a key predictor of political behaviors. This approach revealed the unique relationship between using political Internet memes and participating in politics.

Table 7.4 *Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Unconventional Political Participation*

Predictor variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	.000	.086	.071
Country	-.217***	-.200***	-.212***
Education	.191**	.084	.091
Political interest		.449***	.378***
Political meme use			.173**
R^2	.111	.291	.316
R^2 Adjusted	.102	.281	.305
R^2 change	.111	.180***	.025***

Note. * indicates $p < 0.05$; ** indicates $p < 0.01$; *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

Gender, *Country*, and *Education* were entered in Step 1 of the model and explain 3.4% of the variance in *Conventional political participation*. *Political interest* was entered in Step 2 and explains an additional 17.7% of the variance. After entry of *Political meme use* in Step 3, the total variance explained by the model is 20%, $F(5, 296) = 784, p < .001$, R^2 Adjusted = .186. *Political meme use* explains an additional 1.2% in *Conventional political participation*. In the final model, *Political interest* and *Political meme use* are statistically significant predictors of *Conventional political participation* (see Table 7.3). As hypothesized, the use of political Internet memes significantly predicts *Conventional political participation*; this effect remains significant even when controlling for *Political interest*.

The third hierarchical regression analysis tested whether the same variables predict *Unconventional political participation* (see Table 7.4). As predicted, this model performed better than the previous model, explaining 31.6% of variance. *Demographics* were entered in

Step 1 of the model and explain 11.1% of the variance in *Unconventional political participation*. *Political interest* was entered in Step 2 and explains an additional 18% of the variance. The total variance explained by the model is 31.6%, $F(5, 296) = 27.395, p < .001$, $R^2 \text{ Adjusted} = .305$. *Political meme use* explains an additional 2.5% in *Unconventional political participation*. In the final model, *Country*, *Political interest*, and *Political meme use* are statistically significant predictors of *Unconventional political participation* (see Table 7.4). *Country* being a significant predictor, mirrors the finding of the preliminary analysis which revealed that US-American participants are more likely to participate in unconventional ways than Germany participants. As hypothesized, the use of political Internet memes significantly predicts *Unconventional political participation*, even when accounting for *Political interest*.

7.8 Discussion

Earlier studies theorized that the use of political Internet memes has a meaningful influence on political life, for example by serving as an instrument for political protest and as a mouthpiece for political dissatisfaction (Shifman, 2014, p. 172). Some scholars have also suggested that the use of political Internet memes relates to, and possibly encourages, other political activities like participation in protests and social movements (Milner, 2013b). In order to provide empirical evidence on the impact of Internet meme use on political processes, in this study I set out to examine an array of political attitudes and behaviors of meme users. Rather than focusing only on the outcome of political meme use, the current study applied a more holistic approach by considering both possible predictors of political meme use, as well as effects of meme use on political participation.

The analysis offers evidence that political interest is a significant predictor of the use of political memes. Since political interest is considered a precursor to political activities (Prior, 2010), this finding tentatively supports the notion that participating in politics via Internet memes constitutes a political behavior. This is further supported by the fact that only individuals who believe a behavior to be politically impactful tend to engage with it for political purposes (Craig, 1979). In this study, political meme efficacy captures the belief that memes are a politically impactful activity (see Appendix E) and the meme efficacy measure was a significant predictor of political meme use. This indicates that individuals who believe memes to be politically efficacious, are more likely to engage with them for political reasons. Taken together, the two predictors—interest in politics and the belief that memes are a meaningful political activity—indicate that meme users consider the use of political Internet memes to be a political behavior.

At the same time, there is no evidence linking the use of political memes to political distrust. This refutes the idea that using Internet memes is a neglectable form of political talk which only allows cynics to voice their grievances without taking meaningful action. Although research on infotainment has frequently been confronted with the notion that political humor provides escapism, dampens political activities, and does not positively contribute to the political landscape (Rill & Cardiel, 2013), the results of the current study paint a different picture. Here, political distrust is not related to the use of political Internet memes, implying that political Internet memes neither enhance users' political distrust, nor attract a subset of particularly distrustful individuals in the first place. Instead of understanding meme use as a contentious, elite-challenging activity appealing only to the politically apathetic (see Dalton & Welzel, 2014), we need to regard political meme use as a

viable form of political behavior. As users themselves reported in qualitative interviews (see Chapter 6), memes allow for participation in public discourse, provide citizens with a collective voice, raise awareness about topical issues, and connect like-minded users. Users furthermore believe that the entertainment function of political Internet memes plays a part in enhancing the experience of political engagement and instigating political activity. As such, I believe that the use of political memes should be given serious consideration as a new form of political activity.

Whether we understand the use of political Internet memes as a political behavior or as political discourse, the results of the survey study also specify a significant relationship between the use of political Internet memes and political participation behaviors. Although the directionality of this relationship is not entirely clear, the fact that the effect remains significant even when controlling for political interest suggests that the use of political memes may in and of itself positively contribute to the political participation of meme users, regardless of users' initial level of political interest. A possible mechanism for this could be what previously has been identified as the gateway effect of infotainment (Baum, 2003; Feldman & Young, 2008; Rottinghaus et al., 2008; Young, 2012; Young & Tisinger, 2006), which suggests that users are initially drawn to humorous political content for entertainment, and go on to become more involved with political topics. Ample evidence for the gateway effect has been presented for political comedy programs, which educate and mobilize hard-to-reach audiences (Davis et al., 2018; Feldman & Young, 2008). Rather than watering down political information and news content, humor and entertainment enhance users' political interest and engagement as they make serious political content more palatable for a wider audience. Political Internet memes with their humorous elements may have a similar effect on

users: research on the uses and gratifications which memes provide has found that users are drawn to political memes for a number of reasons, among them entertainment and identity-work (see results of the interview study in Chapter 6). These motives for using political Internet memes support the political aspirations of users, in that they enhance the experience of participating in a networked political discourse. The humorous elements of political Internet memes provide a safeguard against criticism when sharing contentious political opinions, allowing users to more freely express themselves. Furthermore, users experience a sense of identity and belonging from using well-known elements of the memetic repertoire. The motives therefore do not stand in competition with the political aspirations of users: they maximize the experience of political digital activism. These findings taken together with the results of the present study, suggest that the net effect of using political Internet memes in order to be politically active may enhance users' enjoyment of engaging with politics, and could thereby help strengthen an active citizenry.

Finally, this study makes a meaningful contribution to research on social media use. Political Internet meme use is a distinct type of political online activity and cannot be generalized to such; other types of political online content-creation such as political blogging, or political online content-consumption such as reading the news, are perhaps stronger predictors of political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010). However, in the discussion of social media shaping political discourse, the study of Internet memes is especially valuable in understanding the effects of ubiquitous political entertainment content, attracting hard-to-reach audiences and providing new avenues for political information and engagement. Because Internet memes not only mirror society but seemingly play a role in shaping it, it is important to address not only the reasons why people are drawn to Internet memes, but also

the effect such content has on them. Political Internet meme use therefore deserves to be considered an impactful behavior with meaningful consequences for political life.

A word of caution should be spared here for the *type* of influence Internet memes may have. Many political Internet memes address contested issues and often use striking political statements or opinions to convey a message. As we have learned from Chapter 6, meme users themselves have remarked that such messages offer superficial answers to complex political and social issues. In this vein, some studies have found that Internet memes propagate stereotypes and even hate speech (Heikkilä, 2017; Prisk, 2017; Yoon, 2016). The impact of Internet memes, particularly when used by groups like the *alt-right*, may therefore incite hatred, discrimination, and possibly violence. It has also become increasingly clear that as the popularity of Internet memes grow, politically motivated individuals and organizations capitalize on astroturfed and commercialized Internet memes (Ratkiewicz et al., 2010). All the more should we remain vigilant of the effect such content might have on users and politics, and aware that Internet memes may serve as a powerful tool for propaganda purposes.

7.9 Limitations

This study is a first attempt at shedding light on the ramifications of political Internet meme use and as such has a number of limitations. The most blatant is the nature of the convenience sample—highly educated and very politically interested individuals—which speaks to a possible self-selection bias, if not a meme user-population that is remarkably different from the average US-American or German citizen. As Shifman (2014, p. 172) suggests, memetic research would do well to focus on participation patterns relating to race, ethnicity, gender, and power to understand alternative routes of expression for marginalized

groups. Future studies might therefore emphasize the demographics of meme users on a global scale, and remain aware of a possible digital divide (Mossberger, 2009).

Second, although Internet meme use can encompass viewing, commenting on, curating, sharing, remixing, or creating content, this study does not explicitly differentiate between these behaviors but treats meme use along a spectrum of little to most active engagement. If we are to conceptualize political meme use as a political behavior, the corresponding political behaviors are vast. For instance, the consumption of political Internet memes resembles the consumption of political entertainment content—such as late night shows—whereas the production and dissemination of political Internet memes corresponds to more active political behaviors—such as engaging in protest. Commenting on political Internet memes and thus engaging with other users can in turn be understood as a form of political talk. The level of political immersion chosen and experienced by users is therefore strongly dependent on what meme behavior they choose to engage with. Future research should take into account individual types of meme behaviors, as different online activities may lead to a different level of immersion and could affect users differently (Valenzuela, 2013).

Furthermore, participants of this study came from one of two countries to include more variance of political attitudes and behaviors. Since the focus of this exploratory study was not on comparing US-American and German participants, no tests of measurement invariance were applied. However, Internet memes are indeed a global phenomenon and the field of memetics would therefore benefit from a thorough country comparison, particularly taking care to include countries with restrictive regimes where political Internet memes likely play a different role for political subversion and dissent (Shifman, 2014, pp. 144).

Finally, this study considers three political attitudes as predictors of meme use and two categories of political participation behaviors as consequences of meme use. The political orientations of meme users are hereby in no way exhausted, nor are the directionalities and complexities of the relationships between these variables. For example, although political interest is most often treated as a stable predictor variable, Lupia and Philpot (2005) find that it is spurred by the use of certain websites. We therefore contend that a further step for memeticists is to isolate the effects of specific meme behaviors on users in controlled experimental settings.

7.10 Conclusion

This study provides a first glimpse into attitudes and behaviors of political Internet meme users. Political Internet meme use is predicted by political interest and political meme efficacy, supporting the notion that using Internet memes may constitute a new form of political activity. Because this study finds no relationship to political distrust, it is proposed that using political Internet memes does not dissuade citizens from meaningful political action. Instead, political Internet meme use predicts unconventional as well as conventional political participation. Future research should rethink contemporary political participation to include such participatory activities, and further study the effects of using humorous political online content.

8 Study 3: The prosocial effects of political Internet meme use

Overall, research finds inconsistent relationships between social media use and political or civic participation. Particularly the effects of individuals engaging with spreadable media such as Internet memes are underresearched. To fill this gap, the following study proposes that different aspects of Internet meme use might activate mechanisms of self-consistency, moral licensing, or impression management, which could in turn impact individuals in terms of their prosocial behavior tendencies. As part of an experimental design ($N=104$), effects of Internet meme consumption versus Internet meme production in public versus private conditions on participants' prosocial behavior were tested. Across two studies, these conditions produce no significant main effects, although they demonstrate a marginally significant interaction effect with the cost of prosocial behavior. Further, of all the individuals who reported to be less selfish, only those who consumed memes acted consistently with this measure. The implications of these results will be discussed, along with avenues for future research to better investigate possible mobilization or slacktivism effects of Internet meme use on further civic and political engagement.

8.1 Introduction

There are three central hypotheses that deal with the question of how the Internet affects citizens' political participation (see Chapter 4). One of these, the slacktivism hypothesis, posits that the Internet and social media are to blame for a decline in political participation. Slacktivism refers to online behaviors in support of a social or political cause, seen as having no meaningful impact, requiring no genuine commitment, and performed primarily to grant satisfaction to those engaged in the activity (Lee & Hsieh, 2013;

Theocharis, 2015). Proponents of the slacktivism hypothesis typically suggest that the rise of social media practices is responsible for the decline in conventional political participation—two trends which have happened to coincide (Beam, Haridakis, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2017). Although the possible mechanisms that could produce slacktivism are often theorized rather than systematically observed, select voices in the public discourse continue to perpetuate the claim that social media produces apathetic citizens and is overall harmful to democracies (see Morozov, 2009b).

The scientific discussion of social media's political impact is more nuanced. However, conflicting results leave unclear how social media affect political behaviors (Valenzuela, 2013). For one, the mobilization hypothesis, which posits that social media provide disenfranchised citizens with easy access to politics and that social media use mobilizes individuals to more deeply engage in civic and political life, has been supported by various studies which speak to a small but significant mobilization effect (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). Second, the diversification hypothesis proposes that the marked decline in conventional political participation can be attributed to an overall expansion of the political participation repertoire. This expansion is reflected in creative and digitally networked online activities, that have been found to be distinct from conventional forms of political participation (Gibson & Canitjoch, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Proponents of the diversification hypothesis therefore propose an expansion of the political participation framework to better monitor the evolution of participatory culture (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018; van Deth, 2014).

Those who insist on a narrow definition of political participation continue to equate online participation with slacktivism (see Leyva, 2017). Particularly the use of humorous

political content evokes skepticism: entertainment allegedly diverts citizens' political interest and action potential away from true political participation (Putnam, 2000). By and large, social science recognizes social media as spaces for political expression, coordination, and information (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Loader et al., 2014), yet light-hearted political content, for the most part, is still viewed as going at the expense of meaningful political commitment (Prior, 2005, 2007). One such genre of light-hearted political content which has been accorded much attention in recent years is that of political Internet memes. Internet memes, or "artifacts of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 6), appear in myriad contemporary social, cultural, and politically contexts. Blending elements of popular culture with political humor, Internet memes often address topical political issues (Ross & Rivers, 2018). From protesting against homophobia in Russia (Gessen, 2018), to mocking Chinese politicians (Lugg, 2013; Rea, 2013), to enabling electoral participation in the United States (Heiskanen, 2017), to providing collective action frames for social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), Internet memes appear time and again around the world. Regularly reaching well beyond the image boards from where they originate and permeating numerous social media platforms, political memes are visible and relevant elements of the public arena today (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2018).

Political Internet memes arouse both interest and suspicion. In light of their recent popularity, many wonder what role they play for social and political life (see Gal et al., 2016; Haddow, 2016; Heikkilä, 2017; Milner, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Williams, Oliver, Aumer, & Meyers, 2016). Empirical results remain scarce because, as with other forms of social media content, the overall societal impact of political Internet memes is difficult to measure. One option to better learn about the role of Internet memes is to study the users behind them

—their motivations for engaging with memetic political content, their political intent, and their political attitudes, and behaviors. If meme users are motivated by a desire to be engaged in political life, and if they understand their use of political memes as a political act, political memes and their impact on users warrants further investigation. Indeed, interview studies, like the one presented in Chapter 6, find that users of political memes express political intent: memes are employed to learn about current topics, express views, connect to like-minded individuals, negotiate cultural identities, and contribute to public discourse (see also Plevriti, 2013). The survey study also finds evidence of a relationship between political meme use and political attitudes and behaviors, particularly for unconventional political participation (see Chapter 7). This effect remained significant even when controlling for political interest, suggesting that the use of political memes may have a unique impact on mobilizing further political behaviors.

To systematize the inconsistent claims made by proponents of the slacktivism, mobilization, and diversification hypothesis, this study approaches the question of how different online behaviors affect citizens. This echoes calls of other scholars, who believe the various social media uses must be better explored to understand the relationship of social media use and participation (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). Therefore, the current study investigates how variables of Internet meme use—type of activity and social observability of the activity—affect users' subsequent behavior. Likely, the study of social media effects has been hampered by the diversity and fluidity of social media: online platforms each encourage specific behaviors and accord users various depths of immersion (Bode, 2017). To more convincingly represent online behaviors and disentangle possible effects, this study looks at specific activities related to political Internet memes. Studying individual meme behaviors

can shed light on the offerings of social media contents and their effects on citizens' political or social inclinations. Internet memes exist beyond the confines of a singular platform or medium (Ross & Rivers, 2018) and allow for an organic analysis of online behavior, as they can be passively consumed or actively produced, anonymously on imageboards or within personalized social networks. As political Internet memes exist at the intersection of political expression, social activism, infotainment, and popular culture, they appeal to a wide range of users and satisfy various motives (Plevriti, 2013; Shifman, 2014).

Prior research has associated the use of social media sites with moral licensing mechanisms in terms of reducing prosocial behavior as a proxy for civic involvement (Soyer et al., 2013; see also Chapter 4). For this reason, and also in line with suggestions by political participation researchers that a wider array of political and social behaviors be considered in participation research (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018), we decided to use prosocial behavior as a proxy for participation. The following section presents findings on the expansion of political behaviors before going further into detail on theories that explain conditions under which slacktivism might occur. These theories will be used to formulate distinct hypotheses that will be tested in the subsequent study.

8.2 Expanding civic participation

Political participation has undergone a fundamental shift in the last two decades, with a remarkable decline in conventional political participation recorded in most Western democracies (Dalton, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Yamamoto et al., 2017). Beyond traditional political participation such as voting and party membership, contemporary political participation is oriented more toward individualized, non-institutionalized behaviors such as

political consumerism, creative participation, and political expression (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Many therefore advocate for a broader definition of political participation, including behaviors not directly geared at influencing decision-makers but at society in general (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

Prosocial behavior is one such category of behaviors, defined as cooperative acts which are “generally beneficial to other people and to the ongoing political system” (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981, p. 4). Prosocial behavior typically includes donating time or money, helping strangers, and volunteering (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006), although some scholars include participation in social activism and protests (Klandermans, 2000), as well as forms of organizational citizenship (Cropanzano & Byrne, 2000). Due to the expansion of the political participation framework, some are considering the effects of social media use on prosocial behavior (e.g., Han, McCabe, Wang, & Chong, 2018; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Soyer et al., 2013). Results of these studies point to a positive relationship, although a systematic overview of mechanisms responsible for prosocial behavior as instigated through social media use is not yet available.

Prosocial behavior can be predicted and moderated by a number of factors (for an overview, see Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). A well-established predictor is the perceived cost for the individual when engaging in helping behavior, which means individuals typically conduct a cost-benefit analysis before behaving prosocially (Piliavin et al., 1981). Experimental designs therefore tend to include low-cost and high-cost behaviors to take into account this factor (Bénabou & Tirole, 2004). Incurred benefits of helping can include monetary compensation, as well as self-satisfaction or social recognition (see

Guéguen & De Gail 2003). Whether others witness a helping behavior is therefore a further factor; impression management motives are found to predict some forms of citizenship behaviors (Bowler & Brass, 2006; Finkelstein, 2006; Grant & Mayer, 2009; Yun, Takeuchi, Liu, 2007). Since social media behaviors typically take place in public or semi-public settings and the central tenet of the slacktivism hypothesis states that social media creates complacency because reactive online environments produce recognition for low-impact behavior, impression management is particularly relevant for the study of social media effects on prosocial behavior.

Based on prosocial behavior research, this study examines the effect of meme use on low-cost and high-cost prosocial behavior. As a possible moderating factor for the relationship between social media use and prosocial behavior, we also take into account the social observability of the social media behavior.

8.3 Social media effects

Research on the effects of social media use have produced mixed results. On one hand, a number of studies find positive relationships between social media use and political attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Lane, Kim, Weeks, Lee, & Kwak., 2017). On the other hand, there remain those who contest these results and argue that the discernable rise of political apathy stems from increased social media practices (Prior, 2005, 2007; Putnam, 2000; Gladwell, 2010).

The causal relationship between social media use and civic behaviors are difficult to measure. For example, in a meta-analysis of 36 studies Boulianne (2015) demonstrates an overall positive relationship of social media use and political participation and civic

engagement, but finds that only half of the coefficients are statistically significant and acknowledges that it is uncertain whether any of these relationships are causal or merely correlational. Leyva (2017) writes that this controversy is further aggravated by the rapidly evolving environment of social media platforms as well as the biased nature of self-report data on which most studies rely. Finally, research examining the effects of social media use on civic behaviors rarely differentiates between online behaviors available to users (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Possibly opposing effects of various social media usages are therefore rarely systematically captured in existing research designs. Since platforms each encourage different behaviors—including liking, sharing, curating, and remixing content, as well as engaging with other users—studying the entirety of social media behaviors would mean studying all available social media platforms and their user base; a cumbersome endeavor. However, considering the lack of clear directionality of social media effects, we deem it necessary to examine more specific mechanisms by which users may be activated (or demobilized) to further participate in political life. Although the mechanisms underlying the slacktivism versus mobilization hypotheses—self-consistency, moral licensing, and impression management—have not been studied and compared for one type of media content, there is evidence available for each of these mechanisms individually.

Self-consistency theory describes the desire of individuals to maintain consistency with their values and behaviors when deciding whether to engage in further prosocial behavior (Festinger, 1957; Freedman & Fraser, 1966). It predicts that individuals who have invested time and effort into a topic, in order to justify these actions, reduce cognitive dissonance, and remain true to themselves, will be motivated to continue their engagement. Applied to the effects of social media use, self-consistency theory predicts that after engaging

in online political participation (or “token support,” see Kristofferson et al., 2014), individuals are more likely to engage in further supportive actions for the same cause. In this line of reasoning, political online behavior, even when politically ineffectual in itself, is seen as mobilizing users and acting as a stepping stone to more meaningful engagement.

Conversely, moral licensing purports that individuals who have already engaged in a supportive behavior are less likely to engage in further prosocial acts. This mechanism takes effect when an initial behavior satisfies an individual’s desire to do something good and thereby gives them license to disengage from subsequent prosocial acts (Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Mazar & Zhong, 2010). In the context of social media effects, moral licensing theory predicts that individuals who engage in political online behavior are granted satisfaction for these behaviors and therefore less motivated to further engage. Here, political online behavior is seen as inhibiting subsequent political engagement, essentially supporting the slacktivism hypothesis.

Impression management describes the desire of individuals to produce a positive image of themselves to others. The wish to look good has been identified as one of the reasons why individuals engage in prosocial behavior (Grant & Mayer, 2009; Leary & Kowalski 1990). It is particularly relevant for social media use, as digital platforms place strong emphasis on social observability and feedback loops, which have been found to incite users to modify their behaviors accordingly (White & Dahl, 2006, 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Particularly, impression management has been identified as motivating the use of online token support to display a positive image to others (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

Most studies examine these mechanisms individually. One notable exception is a study by Kristofferson et al. (2014) who marry together impression-management motives and self-

consistency theory. The authors propose that social observability of an initial act of token support moderates the effect of said token support on further prosocial behavior. They argue that self-consistency motives are more strongly activated in contexts with low social observability when the private self becomes salient, meaning private token support produces more prosocial behavior. As opposed to explaining how impression management induces prosocial behavior, Kristofferson et al. (2014) propose that impression management, when already satisfied through high social observability of token support, decreases an individual's need to engage in further prosocial acts for social recognition.

8.4 Overview of the study

There is evidence that mechanisms of moral licensing, self-consistency, and impression management moderate the effects of social media use on prosocial behavior. Adopting these to the context of memes, the following study predicts that actively producing political Internet memes provides individuals with a stronger sense of having made an impact, thus triggering the moral licensing mechanism and decreasing the need to engage in further prosocial behavior. Conversely, consuming political memes is hypothesized to activate self-consistency motives and incite further engagement with the cause.

8.4.1 Moral licensing hypothesis

According to the moral licensing approach, individuals who have already participated in some form of activism—for example, the creation of memes—should not feel the need to engage in other forms as their desire to do something good has been quenched. Consuming memes, on the other hand, should not result in reduced prosocial behavior as no action has taken place. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Meme production results in less subsequent prosocial behavior than meme consumption.

8.4.2 Impression management hypothesis

In line with the impression management approach, this study proposes that producing political Internet memes in a condition with high social observability satisfies the desire to manage one's impression, thereby having an inhibiting effect on further prosocial behavior. Meanwhile, the private production of political Internet memes activates self-consistency motives and leads to further engagement for the cause, increasing prosocial behavior. This leads us to formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: Public meme production results in less subsequent prosocial behavior than private meme production.

8.4.3 Research design

To test these hypothesis, we used a multifactorial design with three levels. We figured that the social observability of meme use would only apply to the production of Internet memes, and thus distributed participants across three experimental conditions: Consumer, Private Producer, and Public Producer. In the Consumer condition, participants were asked to view and evaluate a series of 10 Internet memes on a socio-politically relevant topic. The image-macro memes were created by the experimenters using online meme generators (all Internet memes used can be found in Appendix J). In the Private and Public conditions, participants were asked to create at least three Internet memes on the same topic. The meme templates provided to participants were the same images as used for the image-macros in the first condition, but without text. All participants were thus exposed to the same visual stimuli.

Further, participants in the Private condition were assured that the memes they produced would not be viewed by anybody except the experimenters. Conversely, in the Public condition participants were told that their memes might be published or viewed by others, for example as part of an academic publication.

After engaging with the Internet memes within the framework of one of the conditions, participants were given the opportunity to show meaningful support for a charity related to the cause with which they had previously engaged. They then had the opportunity to donate a part of their monetary compensation to the charity (high-cost), or to provide their e-mail address to receive more material and information from the charity (low-cost). These measurements formed the main dependent variable in this study.

In order to test hypothesis 1, the Consumer and Public/Private conditions were compared. In order to test hypothesis 2, the Public and Private conditions were compared. Thus, the analyses of the central predictions rely on a between-factors ANOVA. An a priori power analysis was performed, to ascertain the necessary sample size using G*Power 3.1.9.2. (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). A medium sized effect at $f = 0.25$, $\alpha = .05$, $\beta = .95$ was assumed and indicated a necessary sample size of $N = 105$.

8.5 Method

8.5.1 Participants

In all, 104 participants (53 female, 51 male¹⁹) were recruited from Jacobs University Bremen, an international university in Germany. The experiment was conducted on campus, in the Social and Behavioral Laboratory, in May, 2017. The cultural, ethnic, and national

¹⁹ So as to be inclusive of all gender identities, participants were given three options. However, no participant self-identified with the category *Other*.

backgrounds of the participants varied due to the nature of the sample (international students, maximum 25% German nationals).

8.5.2 Procedure

Per session, a maximum of 20 participants were invited to the laboratory. Participants were welcomed by an assistant. Upon arriving, the participants each selected an ID number and were led to an individual computer booth. There, they were instructed to input their ID numbers and gender identity into the computer, after which they were asked to follow the instructions on their screens.

8.5.2.1 Independent variable

The participants were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions: Consumer, Private or Public. In all three conditions, the participants were first asked to read a text on equal access to education in West Africa (see Appendix H), after which a manipulation check was conducted to ensure that participants had sufficiently understood the text. In addition, the first of three measures of emotional response (EMO1) were assessed. This measure was included to control for emotional arousal, which indicates mobilization (Berger & Milkman, 2013); more precisely, we wanted to test whether meme-production itself (rather than the subsequent prosocial action) provides a sufficient emotional outlet, and thus encourages moral licensing. The measure included seven emotional statements, chosen to reflect various levels of pleasantness and arousal (I felt... relaxed, joyful, sad, frustrated, interested, angry, enthusiastic, bored, other) (see Barrett, 1998; Berger & Milkman, 2013). Participants could evaluate each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 3 = somewhat, 5 = extremely).

Next, participants were asked to indicate how often they use Internet memes, and how efficacious they believe political Internet memes to be (Internet meme use, political Internet meme use, political meme efficacy). Then, they engaged with the topic of West African education using Internet memes. Participants in the Consumer condition were asked to evaluate a series of 10 memes (recognizable image templates with superimposing text, see Appendix G for all memes used in this condition) in terms of humor, appropriateness, cleverness, and potential impact. This was done so that we could insure that participants had consumed the Internet memes and engaged with the topics portrayed in the images.

In the Public and Private conditions, participants were asked to produce image-based memes using the same templates and about the same topic. For this purpose, a simple user-interface provided a selection of templates and a field for participants to input their own, original text. Participants in the Private condition were informed that their created memes would remain private, whereas participants in the Public condition were told that their memes might be published to a wider audience. This was achieved by varying the instructions at the beginning of the meme-creation task so that the participants in the Private conditions read:

“The memes you create will be used only for academic purposes. They will be archived in a confidential data base after the study comes to an end, while preserving your anonymity. Nobody but the research team will see them.”

In the Public condition, the instructions read:

“The memes you create will be shown to participants in another study we are conducting. We will not disclose your name or confidential information to those participants. Some of the memes you create may also be published in the academic article based on this

study. Otherwise, they will be archived in a confidential data base after the study comes to an end, while preserving your anonymity.“

8.5.2.2 Questionnaire measures

After engaging with memes on a certain topic, all participants were given the same emotion-thermometer measure (EMO2), and a post-experimental questionnaire. This questionnaire contained items on participants' previous engagements with conventional and unconventional political participation, political interest, and political trust. The purpose of these items was to control for participants' opinions on political participation in general, as well as their attitudes towards unconventional methods of socio-political activism. Because this study was interested in mechanisms of moral licensing versus the need for self-consistency, two additional measures of internal consistency and impression management were assessed. The first measure was created using the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (shortened 10-item scale; Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972), and the impression management part of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (shortened 8-item version; Hart, Ritchie, Hepper, & Gebauer, 2015); a comprehensive overview of all measures and items can be found in Appendix I.

8.5.2.3 Dependent variable

After the questionnaire, participants were paid the compensation fee of EUR 8.50 in cash, but told to wait in the individual computer booths for the experimental assistant to prepare the necessary receipts. The reason for choosing this particular sum of money for the participants' monetary compensation was two-fold: on one hand, it was a fair and attractive amount of money for the chosen student sample. On the other hand, the sum was paid out as

one five-euro note, one two-euro coin, one one-euro coin, and a 50-cent coin. This gave participants a wide range of donation options, limiting possible issues with affordance and demand characteristics.

While waiting, participants were invited to read over a pamphlet of World Learning (www.worldlearning.org), a charity dedicated to global education projects. The focus of the charity is aligned with the socio-political issue that participants had engaged with during the experiment—education access in West Africa. Attached to the pamphlet was an envelope and a short questionnaire. On it, participants were invited to do one of two possible prosocial actions: donate to the charity or leave an email address to receive more information on the charity's activities. The first option—donation—forms the high-cost prosocial behavior option, whereas the second—leaving one's email address—forms the low-cost prosocial behavior option. Participants were instructed to place the pamphlet and questionnaire into the provided envelope and leave all material on the desk along with their donations and/or email address, should they choose to give either.

After giving the participant approximately five minutes to look over the materials and decide on their course of action, the experimental assistant returned and explained that there had been a problem with the online survey, in that a final measure had been forgotten. The participants were then asked to fill in the final emotional thermometer (EMO3) on paper. This resulted in a measure of emotional response to reading the topic itself (EMO1), one after engaging with memes on the topic (EMO2), and a final one, occurring after the opportunity to engage in prosocial behavior for the same cause. We were mostly interested in the intensity of the first emotional response, as a possible indicator for the final donation amount, but also in the differences between emotional responses in the three waves. More precisely, we were

interested in the change in emotional response from EMO1 to EMO2 (How does engaging with memes on a certain topic change the intensity of emotions connected to that topic?), and from EMO1 to EMO3 (How does donating to a charity dealing with the socio-political issue at hand change the intensity of emotions connected to that topic?). After this, the participants were debriefed and individually escorted out of the laboratory. After they had left, the experimental assistant picked up the envelope they had left behind, as well as the final questionnaire.

The total sum of money which participants had donated was transferred to the charity World Learning at the end of the study.

8.5.3 Analyses

This study is based on the comparison of three experimental conditions (*Consumer*, *Private Producer*, and *Public Producer*). More precisely, we first test for a general difference between conditions in a one-way ANOVA. Additionally, to test the first hypothesis we use a t-test to compare means in the *Consumer* condition to the *Producer* condition (*Public* and *Private* together). To test the second hypothesis, we compare means in the *Private* and *Public* conditions.

8.6 Results

Of the 104 participants who took part in the study, 34 participants (32.7%) were assigned to the *Consumer* condition, while 35 participants (33.7%) were assigned to the *Private* and *Public* conditions each. The distribution of participants to the different conditions by gender was even ($\chi^2(2, 104) = 1.86, p = .39$). All participants were meme savvy without being recruited as such. They reported looking at memes very frequently ($M(104) = 3.2, SD =$

0.69; 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = always), as well as commenting on ($M(104) = 2.36$, $SD = 0.86$) and sharing memes ($M(104) = 2.04$, $SD = 0.92$) relatively often. In addition, we found that participants judged memes to be an effective way of raising awareness ($M(104) = 3.33$, $SD = 1.065$), indicated that they felt memes impact people's opinions and attitudes ($M(104) = 3.22$, $SD = 1.07$), and believed that memes can affect the opinions of voters ($M(104) = 3.67$, $SD = 1.05$; 1 = strongly disagree, 3 = undecided, 5 = strongly agree).

Overall, participants donated an average of EUR 0.70 to the charity. As is typical of student samples, the overall donations were low. In fact, only 30.8% of participants ($n = 32$) donated anything at all. When it came to the less costly option, leaving one's email address to receive more information on the activities of the charity, 52% of the participants chose to leave an email address.

We identified two outliers who donated far more than the rest, at EUR 8.50 and EUR 9.30²⁰ respectively; both of these participants had been assigned to the *Private* condition. We took this into consideration when performing our main analyses, but as the two outliers did not change the results, decided to keep them in the dataset. In addition, one participant wrote in the email field but did not provide a working email address. We coded this case as missing data, since it was unclear whether they had made a simple mistake or were unwilling to give out a real email contact. Thus, no participants were eliminated from the analyses.

We found no significant effect of condition on donations to the charity ($F(2, 103) = 0.51$, $p = .60$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$). Thus, no matter in what type of activity with memes the participants partook, they did not show significantly different levels of costly prosocial action. The same

²⁰ This participant added money from their own pocket to surpass the EUR 8.50 compensation fee.

Table 8.1 *Frequency of Email Disclosure, Donation, and Amount Donated by Condition*

Condition/ prosocial action	Consumer (<i>n</i> =34)	Public (<i>n</i> =35)	Private (<i>n</i> =34)	Total (<i>N</i> =103)
Low cost (email; binary measure)	.44 (0.50)	.54 (0.51)	.59 (0.50)	.52 (0.50)
High cost (donation; binary measure)	.41 (0.50)	.26 (0.44)	.26 (0.45)	.31 (0.47)
High cost (donation amount in EUR)	0.79 (1.38)	0.48 (1.06)	0.84 (2.20)	0.70 (1.61)

Note. Standard deviation in parenthesis

was true of the less costly prosocial option of disclosing one's email address for more information on the charity ($F(2, 102) = 0.76, p = .47, \eta^2 = 0.02$).

Next, we tested hypothesis 1, which predicted that producing, rather than consuming, memes would lead to less prosocial activity. We found no difference between meme consumers (*Consumer* condition) and meme producers (*Public* and *Private* conditions) in terms of donation amounts ($t(102) = 0.40, p = .69, 95\% CI [-0.54, 0.81], d = 0.08$), donation frequency ($t(102) = 1.61, p = .13, 95\% CI [0.10, -0.05], d = 0.32$), or frequency of leaving one's email address ($t(102) = -1.18, p = .24, 95\% CI [-0.33, 0.09], d = 0.23$). Thus, we found no support for hypothesis 1 in either the high-cost or low-cost prosocial activity.

We then tested hypothesis 2, which predicted that producing memes for public rather than private consumption would result in less subsequent prosocial activity. We found no difference between *Private* and *Public* meme producers in terms of donation amounts ($t(68) = -0.87, p = .39, 95\% CI [-1.18, 0.47], d = -0.21$), donation frequency ($t(68) = 0, p = 1, 95\% CI [-0.21, 0.21], d = 0$), or frequency of leaving one's email address ($t(68) = -0.38, p = .71, 95\%$

$CI [-0.29, 0.20]$, $d = -0.09$). Thus, we found no support for hypothesis 2 in either high-cost or low-cost prosocial activity.

Because our two hypotheses failed, we then decided to take a look at the control variables, namely cost, emotional arousal, and reputation concerns, and explore how they relate to the three experimental conditions. First, we were interested in the possible interaction effect between our different levels of the dependent variable in terms of cost, which has previously been identified as a relevant factor for prosocial behavior (Piliavin et al., 1981). Therefore, we created a dummy variable, *COST*, which coded for participants' donation frequencies and email address disclosure frequencies. Thus, we attained a measure of frequency of prosocial action which is sensitive to its cost for the individual, with monetary donations (Yes/No) being the high-cost, and the email disclosure (Yes/No) being the low-cost option. We then submitted this score to a repeated measures general linear model where the between-subject factor, experimental condition (*Consumer*, *Private*, or *Public*), predicts the within-subject factor, *COST* (high/low). We found a significant main effect of cost ($F(1, 100) = 14.79$, $p < .000$, $\eta^2 = .13$), as well as a marginally significant interaction effect between condition and cost of the prosocial activity ($F(2, 100) = 2.77$, $p = 0.07$, $\eta^2 = .05$). In other words, the less costly the prosocial option, the more people, irrespective of condition, are likely to take it. In addition, the likelihood of making a monetary donation—choosing the high-cost prosocial option—is highest among participants who were assigned to the *Consumer* condition (see Table 8.1). Note that these are measurements of frequency, not total amount donated. Thus, in terms of frequency, consumers were marginally more likely to choose the costly option, whereas meme producers, both in the *Private* and *Public* conditions, were more likely to choose the less costly email option.

Table 8.2 *Correlations of Reported Emotions with Indicators of Prosocial Behavior*

Emotion type (time point)	Donation (frequency)	Donation (amount)	Email (frequency)
Positive (1)	-.02 (p=.83)	-.03 (p=.78)	.12 (p=.22)
Positive (2)	.06 (p=.61)	.07 (p=.46)	.17 (p=.09)
Positive (3)	.06 (p=.54)	.10 (p=.32)	.14 (p=.17)
Negative (1)	-.02 (p=.88)	.01 (p=.89)	.12 (p=.23)
Negative (2)	.04 (p=.71)	.03 (p=.79)	.19 (p=.05)
Negative (3)	-.04 (p=.66)	-.04 (p=.68)	.12 (p=.22)

Next, we turn our attention to the emotional thermometers. We performed an exploratory factor analysis which gave us a two-factor solution for the thermometers, grouping the individual items into what we called positive (joyful, interested, excited), and negative (sad, frustrated, angry, relaxed [reversed]) emotions. These measures were orthogonal, as we found no correlation between them at any time-point at which we collected emotional thermometers (time 1: $r = -0.12$, $p = .22$; time 2; $r = -0.14$, $p = .17$; time 3: $r = -0.06$, $p = .53$).

We next checked whether intensity of positive and negative emotions reported at any of the three time points (after reading about the topic, after evaluating/creating memes, and after donations) correlated with any of the indicators of prosocial behavior. No significant correlations were identified with any of the indicators, at any time point, for any type of emotion (see Table 8.2). A marginally significant correlation was found between the level of negative emotions experienced after evaluating/creating memes, and the tendency to leave one's email ($r = .19$, $p = .05$).

Finally, we turn our attention to reputation concerns. In an exploratory factor analysis, we identified a single dimension and several outliers. Rather than dealing with social desirability and concerns about reputation management, however, the remaining items seemed to us more consistent with a measure of Machiavellian thinking (“There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone”; “Sometimes I tell lies”), impulsivity (“Sometimes I try to get even rather than forgive and forget”; “There have been occasions when I felt like smashing things”), and indifference to social convention (“I have said something bad about a friend before”; “I never resent being asked to return a favor (reversed)”). The triad of Machiavellianism, impulsivity, and indifference to social conventional constitutes a soft measure of psychopathy (Brinkley, Schmitt, Smith, & Newman, 2001). We thus dubbed the measure *PSYCH* and considered it a measure of selfish, anti-social behavior. Overall, participants scored in the mid-range on *PSYCH* ($M(104) = 2.71$; $SD = 0.61$). We correlated *PSYCH* with different indicators of prosocial behavior (donations frequency, donation amount, email frequency) across different conditions, and found that *PSYCH* was significantly, negatively correlated to donation amounts ($r(34) = -.39$, $p = .02$) in the *Consumer* condition, but not in the *Private* ($r(34) = -.06$, $p = .73$) or *Public* ($r(35) = -.03$, $p = .89$) conditions. Thus, when it came to donation amount, meme *Consumers*—who were the second-most generous group—were more generous the less they scored on our indicator of selfish tendencies. However, this was not true of meme producers in either the *Private* or *Public* conditions, indicating that something else, and not personality-based factors, is needed to explain donation sizes in those conditions.

8.7 Discussion

The goal of this study was to test whether different conditions of meme use would incite individuals to different levels of prosocial behavior. Participants in our study were asked to engage with memetic content on a specific topic in three different ways: passively, by consuming and evaluating memes, and actively, by either producing memes for public consumption, or producing memes for private consumption. In accordance with our slacktivism hypothesis (H1), we had predicted that a more active engagement with memetic content on a topic would lead to fewer, less generous donations for a cause of that same topic. We had also predicted that active engagement with memes would lead to less generous donations if the memes being produced were shared publicly rather than privately (H2). We also performed exploratory analyses on cost, emotional arousal, and reputation concerns.

However, in this study we found no support for either hypothesis. The participants' willingness to do something meaningful for a social cause did not show any significant differences between the Consumer and Producer conditions, nor between the two sub-conditions of meme production: Public and Private. Our results can be explained by several factors. First, it is possible that the effect size we initially envisioned was too large and our study was underpowered. It could be that a bigger sample is necessary to test for smaller effect sizes of meme activities. A second explanation could be the design of the three experimental conditions. Creating a realistic setting for participants to engage in meme activities is challenging, as memes typically occur in reactive, socially networked online environments. To some degree, we can dismiss the idea that participants were not invested in the task, since we could see from the ways in which memes were created and evaluated that participants remained concentrated throughout the experiment, but whether the meme tasks

sufficiently mirrored real-life meme consumption and production, we cannot be sure. We are likewise not certain that the instructions for the two meme producer conditions (that aimed to induce the high versus low social observability condition) were clearly read and retained by all participants. Here, a measure on audience perception could have provided answers.

Overall, we suspect that due to its flaws in design and the small sample size, this study does not have sufficient power to make conclusive claims about the effects of meme use on prosocial behavior.

Nevertheless, our study yielded some interesting findings that could be useful to future research. Most notably, we found some support for the slacktivism hypothesis in the participants' *choice* of prosocial behavior. Although participants were overall more likely to choose the less-costly prosocial action, participants in the Consumer condition that had the least active engagement with memes were marginally more likely to donate money (i.e., to choose the high-cost prosocial option). Conversely, participants in the Public and Private conditions, having already engaged with the topic extensively through the active creation of memes, preferred the less costly, less meaningful option. This finding goes in line with moral balancing theory, which suggests that individuals strive to achieve a balance of engaging in altruistic and egoistic behaviors (Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007; Mazar & Zhong, 2010). In the case of media use, moral balancing theory has been found to explain how individuals who have actively engaged in token support via social media, feel licensed to choose a less costly altruistic activity, whereas a passive online activity does not provide people with this license (Kristofferson et al., 2014). Our findings lead us to conditionally conclude that there might be merit to the slacktivism hypothesis in terms of a moral balancing effect, in that meme

production, as a form of token support, drains the willingness to do something more meaningful and instead, causes individuals to settle on the less costly option.

Additionally, we found that our measure of selfishness only correlated to one measure of prosocial behavior (donation amounts) in the Consumer condition. By itself, this finding is not striking; people who report being less selfish also behave less selfishly (Festinger, 1957; Freedman & Fraser, 1966). In fact, this finding goes in line with well-established theories of consistency (Kristofferson et al., 2014). What is interesting, however, is the fact that this correlation is only present in the Consumer condition. In other words, people who produce memes are not affected in their prosocial behavior by being selfish. This leads us to believe that actively producing memes seems to have made participants' psychopathy (=selfishness) less relevant in their subsequent decision-making on whether and how to engage in prosocial activities. As to what could override this consistency mechanism, our current data does not provide answers. It is conceivable that consuming memes creates a sort of self-awareness of individuals' moral compass. Suppose that having learned about a social issue and not being able to sufficiently do something about it produces a feeling of guilt or shame, this could lead to higher donations in those individuals that generally view themselves as prosocial individuals. Another explanation could be that meme production provides individuals with a sense of personal identification with the content and experience of fulfillment. Regardless of how meaningful an activity is in terms of actually tackling the problem, a creative problem-solving task might alleviate any need for further action.

Finally, considering that the participants in our student sample were not recruited based on their meme-savviness, it is noteworthy that they report reasonably high levels of meme use, as well as high levels of political meme efficacy. This finding goes in line with

previous studies (see Chapters 6 and 7), which likewise finds that many average Internet users hold the belief that memes are an effective tool for political, civic, and social engagement. This finding alone shows that the role of Internet memes in socio-political contexts today deserve our scholarly attention.

In conclusion, this study does not find significant results in support of the two hypotheses; nevertheless, the findings hint at the fact that different activities and contexts of Internet meme use could produce individual-levels effects in terms of demobilizing users' further prosocial behavior tendencies.

8.8 Limitations

This study presents with several limitations that future studies should consider improving upon to better retest various conditions of meme use. Most importantly, we suggest that future work introduce a control group against which various meme activities be compared. We also propose that further research consider conducting such experiments in a more natural environment of Internet memes: the Internet. An online experiment would provide the added benefit of more easily obtaining a larger sample than is typically feasible in a laboratory. Further, our measures of emotions could be improved upon, for example by including a measure of guilt or shame, that could mediate the effects of meme use of prosocial behavior, or anxiety when confronted with negative content (see Berger & Milkman, 2013). Finally, we suggest widening the dependent variable to other measures of activities typically found both online and offline, such as crowdfunding, signing petitions, or sharing calls to action in online networks. Broadening the perspective on possible prosocial behaviors would

provide a better understanding of how Internet meme use could affect the many prosocial behavior options available to online users.

8.9 Conclusion

This experiment aimed to provide a novel approach to the study of online content and civic behavior, by isolating some of the characteristics of online content that could mobilize or inhibit prosocial behavior. The two hypotheses concerning impression management and moral licensing mechanisms failed, which led us to look at the cost of the prosocial activity, emotional arousal, and reputation concerns across the three conditions. We found that meme consumers were marginally more likely to choose a higher-cost prosocial behavior option. Furthermore, we found that reported selfishness only translated into selfish behavior in the consumer condition. These findings led us to tentatively conclude that slacktivism effects may take place under different meme activity conditions.

In summation, we conclude that the reproach toward social media in creating apathetic citizens is too far-fetched, but believe that under certain circumstances, online participation might inhibit some social, civic, or political activities. Due to the strong level of meme efficacy, though, we suggest that future meme research additionally approach the topic from the perspective of meme use, and study meme use as a societally relevant behavior in and of itself. Thus, we call for more research that tackles the uses and effects of Internet memes from various points of view.

9 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the three studies performed and the findings set out in this dissertation. In the first section, we review the results of the three studies before we answer the main research questions of this project. In the second section, we discuss the implications these findings have on our understanding of Internet meme use and on unconventional forms of citizenship, and finally turn to ways in which this work can be elaborated on, particularly by scholars wishing to further study the intersections of spreadable media, citizens, and participatory culture.

9.1 Summary of studies

This dissertation contains an assessment of the political change Internet memes generate by focusing on the personal motives, experiences, political attitudes, and behaviors of meme users. It did so by adducting approaches from related scholarly disciplines. In the second chapter, we began by reviewed Internet memes as spreadable media that function in highly interactive online settings and thereby communicate socio-political topics to other actors in the public sphere. The third chapter presented the historical convergence of entertainment and politics that has led to new genres encroaching on the public sphere. This highlighted one extensively studied genre—that of late-night comedy and its effects on political knowledge, trust, efficacy, and participation (see Chapter 3.1). Then, the possible gateway effects of political entertainment media that take place via a hybridity of hedonic entertainment and eudaimonic entertainment in digital online politics was touched upon (see Chapter 3.2). Finally, we reviewed the classic framework of political participation (see Chapter 4.1) and the expansion to informal, non-allegiant, creative, participatory and digitally

networked participation (see Chapter 4.2). From this, it became clear that the study of emergent political activities can benefit from insights into the political intent of individuals who engage with political content (see Chapter 4.3).

This led me conclude that, to study the political impact of Internet memes, it was necessary to first examine the individual motives and political intent behind Internet memes use in order to establish whether users turn to Internet meme use as an act of political participation. I also proposed to compare the intended impact of using Internet memes to measurable effects of Internet meme use because, although individuals may use Internet memes deliberately and consciously, they may not be aware of the effects of Internet meme use. I therefore deemed an alignment of these two aspects essential to understanding meme effects on both the individual and societal levels. I formulated three main research questions that were as follows:

- RQ1: What role do individuals accord to Internet memes in political contexts?
- RQ2: Are Internet memes a relevant element of today's political participation repertoire?
- RQ3: Does the use of political Internet memes affect political life on an individual level?

To answer these questions, three studies using qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and data analysis explored the uses and effects of political Internet memes. In the first study, the motives for using Internet memes, and the political impact of Internet memes as experienced and perceived by individuals, were explored. Meme experts were recruited from Germany, the United States, Turkey, and Iceland, as well as regular meme

users from an international university in Germany. Using the Delphi-method, we conducted in-depth interviews that allowed for an iterative exchange of ideas and moderated discussion. Participants in the study were able to recount how they experienced Internet memes in political contexts—in social movements and everyday politics. Due to the varied cultural backgrounds, the experiences of participants in this study were not country-specific. A qualitative content analysis showed that meme use is driven by three main motives: self-expression, social identity, and entertainment. These motives were found to work in unison to enhance the users' experience of engaging in the multitude of topics that Internet memes reflect, including topical and contentious socio-political issues. In this sense, participants identified memes as providing lighthearted access to serious issues and reported that memes could provide a gateway for further political action. These findings echo previous research on gateway mechanisms of political entertainment media (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 138; Feldman & Young, 2008; Young, 2012; Young & Tisinger, 2006). Further, the role of humor was found to make difficult-to-process topics more palatable by providing comic relief, as well as binding meme users together, creating a feeling of unity in the group and a sense of superiority or exclusion toward individuals who were not meme users. This result, as argued in Chapter 6.8, reflects both the superiority, as well as relief function, of political humor that have previously been observed (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Boukes et al., 2015; Rottinghaus et al., 2008; Young, 2012, 2013; see also Chapter 3.2).

In addition, the participants critically discussed the role of Internet memes in political processes, characterizing the brevity, reach, and relatability of Internet memes as both advantages and shortcomings. As such, Internet memes were characterized as easily disseminating political information and personal points of view to large audiences but also as

possible tools for propaganda and as a way to exclude people who were not familiar with meme vernacular (Leavitt, 2014; Milner, 2013a). The participants concluded that Internet memes lend themselves well to certain political activities, but are not suitable for replacing other forms of political participation. It is thus concluded that Internet memes are societally impactful in supplementing and promoting political activities, which coincides with other forms of creative, digitally networked political activities that on one hand facilitate political and civic participation (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018).

Building on the findings of the first study as well as on previous research on political entertainment media (see Chapter 3.1), the second study focused on the theorized mobilization effect that suggests that online participation enhances political participation (Boulianne, 2009, 2015). In addition, the possible antecedents of political Internet meme use as support of a gateway toward deeper political engagement were examined—namely, political interest, political trust, and political efficacy (see Chapter 4.3). US-American and German participants took part in an online survey that measured political Internet meme use, attitudinal predictors of political participation, and political participation. I hypothesized that traditional predictors of political participation—political interest, political trust, and political meme efficacy—would predict the use of political memes, enabling classification of political Internet meme use as a political activity and a better understanding of it, in terms of a nonallegiant or allegiant political behavior. I also hypothesized that political meme use would enhance further political activity, promoting higher levels of political participation. To test these predictions, two sets of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted; first, to test whether political attitudes predict the use of political Internet memes and, second, to test

whether the use of political Internet memes predicts political participation. In line with the hypotheses, the data showed that political interest and political meme efficacy significantly predict the use of political Internet memes. Political trust was not found to relate to the use of political Internet memes, implying that turning to Internet memes is not done as a way of turning away from mainstream politics, which further suggests that Internet memes are not used by people as a nonallegiant way of participating in politics (Pollock, 1983). Hence, Internet meme use represents an alternative, but not subversive, type of political activity—a finding which supports the notion that a diversification of participation and citizenship is currently under way in participatory media environments (Copeland, 2013; Davis et al., 2018; Hartley, 2010; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Furthermore, the use of political Internet memes significantly predicts engagement in politics, with a stronger effect on unconventional political participation. The use of political Internet memes is related to political behaviors and can be predicted by well-established political attitudes. This led to the conclusion that Internet meme use can be understood as an allegiant and meaningful form of political activity that goes hand in hand with other political variables, and that may also activate people to participate in politics, in both conventional and unconventional ways. These results are in line with those from other studies that have found small to moderate mobilizing effects of online participation on political participation (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018; Skoric et al., 2016).

In light of the findings of study two, which suggested that the use of Internet memes could mobilize citizens to engage in the public sphere, the last study set out to test a possible activation mechanism of Internet meme use in a controlled environment. A laboratory experiment was conducted that tested the effect of meme use on prosocial behavior. Prosocial

behavior was chosen instead of a more specific measure of political participation for two reasons. First, in the past decades, the once narrow definition of political participation has broadened to include many civic and social activities (Bennett et al., 2011; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Klandermans, 2000; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018; see also Chapter 8.2). Second, there was a concern that accurately replicating a formal political activity in the laboratory would not be as convincing as offering informal prosocial behavior options. Thus, two prosocial behaviors—high-cost (donation) and low-cost (leaving email)—were focused on as a measure of citizen engagement. Participants in this study were recruited from an international university in Germany, and were either asked to produce Internet memes pertaining to a social cause, with the condition of either high or low social observability, or to consume Internet memes on the same topic. This resulted in a multifactorial design with three levels (see Chapter 8). Overall, there was no significant difference between individuals who consumed Internet memes and individuals who produced Internet memes, under conditions of high or low social observability. Likewise, no differences were found in the emotional states of participants before or after the meme task, or after the option to engage in a prosocial behavior; however, the study did reveal a marginally significant interaction effect between the cost of the prosocial behavior and the condition of the meme activity. As discussed in Chapter 8.7, this could imply that a slacktivism effect takes place when meme users engage in active meme behavior; active meme use could induce a sense of complacency, licensing individuals to engage in less prosocial behavior. Further, it was found that a measure of selfishness was associated with participants' decision to engage in prosocial behavior if they had been asked to consume Internet memes, but not for participants who had been asked to produce Internet memes. This led to a suspicion that

producing content could override mechanisms that take place when users consume content. Concretely, I argue that people who produce memes are not affected in their prosocial behavior tendencies by selfishness; producing memes seemed to have make selfishness less relevant in a subsequent decision on whether and how to engage in prosocial activities. This suggests that follow-up studies should consider other variables, such as identification with the meme topic and feelings relating to guilt or shame. Due to the small sample in this study, however, a detailed interpretation of these results was avoided.

Overall, it is proposed that more research is carried out on differentiating between specific types of social media activities, and studying how these may affect users in their propensity to engage in socio-political activities (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018; Feldman, 2013). A definitive finding of the third study was that participants reported a strong belief in the political effectiveness of Internet memes, the same measure of political meme efficacy that was employed in the second study. In fact, this mirrored the findings from the previous two studies, in which participants reported that they believed Internet memes could significantly impact politics; in the second study, this belief significantly predicted the use of political Internet memes.

Below, these results are examined with regard to the overall research questions. The first research question asked what role individuals accord to Internet memes in political contexts. The purpose of this question was to enrich contemporary memetics research with the addition of meme users' experiences, and thus contribute to the work of contemporary Internet meme scholars, such as Milner (2013b, 2016), Shifman (2014), and Ross and Rivers (2018), who had identified Internet memes as relevant tools for political communication and participation in various socio-political and cross-cultural contexts. Across all three studies, the

participants reported that Internet memes could be, and are, used for political purposes. In the first study in particular, the participants made a strong case for Internet memes as tools of personal-political expression, supported by the simultaneous experience of entertainment and sense of social identity. In the second and third studies, participants reported that memes are politically impactful, for example, by affecting voters and influencing political actors. At the same time, meme users reported on the shortcomings of Internet memes, calling into question the notion that memes produce meaningful socio-political change—a trend also witnessed more widely online (see Appendix J for examples of Internet memes reflective of their political role). This means that not only do meme users add a valuable perspective to the study of Internet memes, but, as citizens, they also critically reflect on their activities and whether they benefit a democratic system. In the eyes of meme users, Internet memes play a significant political role, but meme use must be supplemented by additional political participation to make a valuable societal impact. The first research question can thus be answered as follows: In political contexts, individuals accord Internet memes the role of raising awareness, enhancing dialogue, and supporting further political activities.

The second research question asked whether Internet memes were a relevant element of today's political participation repertoire. This question hinges on our understanding of political participation, and whether, as some authors have suggested (see Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018), emerging participatory activities can be considered to be politically relevant. I argue in Chapter 4 that, in order to classify the use of political Internet memes as a politically meaningful activity, meme users have to express political intent, and meme use has to impact on political life in a measurable way. In particular, the first study revealed that meme users express political intent in using Internet memes in political

contexts; the measures of political interest and political meme efficacy of the second and third studies further corroborate these findings. As to the measureable impact of political Internet memes, this depends on what we consider a politically relevant effect. Although preliminary research has found evidence that public discourse—including memetic digital discourse—lastingly influences the political sphere, another solution is to consult user perceptions. As proposed in Chapter 4.3, this difficulty can also be overcome by understanding the type of political effect that meme users envision when they engage with political Internet memes, and seeing whether this can be realized through the activity. In the first study, participants characterized Internet memes as a tool of self-expression, and reported that producing political Internet memes was done with the purpose of wanting to raise awareness, bring contentious issues into the spotlight, and convince others of their views. The consumption of political Internet memes was done with the purpose of feeling the temperature of the Internet and learning how others felt about issues. From this, it was deduced that the intended effect of using political Internet memes relates to political talk and political discourse; engaging in the political sphere by talking about it (van Deth, 2014). Although the primary intention of users to engage with memetic content may not be political, this does not devalue the political aspect of talking about politics and exchanging views, arguments, and experiences about topical issues. Political talk generally is considered to be a form of informal political participation, even if other motives, such as social interaction, are satisfied (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016).

I propose that we regard the use of political Internet memes as a form of informal participation, bringing humor and entertainment aspects to serious political talk, and that, in its hybrid form as both hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment (Weinmann & Vorderer, 2018),

it is part of the multitude of participatory socio-political activities relevant to citizens today (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). As to the political relevance of political talk, Dahlgren (2009, p. 100) wrote, “obviously not all talk in everyday life is politically significant, but we should always remain open to the possibilities of the political emerging—and anticipate how they might be translated into politics.” By viewing political engagement as a spectrum, as providing gateways to serious and formal modes of participation, we can understand political Internet meme use as belonging to one end of this spectrum. As with Hartley’s (2010) concept of silly or playful citizenship, which he argued relates to informal, mediated, and do-it-yourself participation, the use of political Internet memes is embedded within other forms of informal participation (see Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). In terms of understanding Internet meme use as a stand-alone political participation behavior, I am hesitant. Considering the criteria that political scientists put forth as constituting political participation—political aim and political influence (see Fox, 2014)—we do not know if the use of political Internet memes sufficiently affects political outcomes on an individual level. I therefore suggest that participation research consider political Internet meme use in future studies, particularly the question as to whether it has the potential to infect others. As we know, participatory, creative, digitally networked activities do not stand alone, but work in concert with other online or offline activities (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Therefore, creating, sharing, or commenting on funny Internet memes is, in itself, not a significant political act when undertaken by one individual. This singular action can, however, become significant when enacted by a large online community or when this is an entry to more political action on an individual level. Meme use is therefore only politically effective and societally valuable in

combination with collective memetic discourse by many others, or as part of one element in an individual's effort to engage in other civic or political activities. Thus, the second research question can be answered as follows: Considered in its socio-cultural context, memetic online discourse meaningfully contributes to political life by enhancing public debate, setting new agendas, providing political commentary, enabling easy and pleasurable access to difficult topics, and creating memetic online communities that can contribute to collective efforts and social movements. Internet meme use can thus be considered a relevant form of today's informal and digitally networked political participation repertoire.

The third question, which asked whether the use of political Internet memes affects political life on an individual level, is the most difficult to answer on the basis of the data obtained from the three studies. For one, the experimental study that could have provided indications for meme effects remained largely inconclusive. A trend toward a possible slacktivism effect by lessening prosocial behavior tendencies after active meme use was found, but it is unclear whether this finding would be replicable. Furthermore, the second study, which modeled political meme use as a predictor of political participation, was based on cross-sectional data, from which causal inferences cannot be confidently made; however, the findings point toward a possible mobilization effect of meme use overall, which means more meme use would produce greater civic engagement. Therefore, I propose that the ways in which the use of social media have been studied over the past few decades do not accurately reflect the behaviors that users are accorded through the rapid rise of social media. A systematic comparison of active versus passive social media activities within one platform, or in terms of one form of content across platforms, has not yet been conducted in the field of political media psychology. Although the third study did not show clear evidence of how

meme production versus meme consumption affected users, this does not categorically rule out the possible effects of such activities, particularly in terms of producing stronger identification with a cause, creating deeper bonds with other users, or inducing the need to take action. Instead of providing results as a way forward, the third study's main contribution is that it demonstrates a possible research design that echoes calls for research on various types of social media uses (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). The third research question remains unanswered; although I propose that that mobilizing and slacktivating effects of using memes do not mutually exclude each other, and could be produced via different online activities, with active, highly visible online activities (such as the production of Internet memes or political blogging) leading to less engagement in other forms of participation, and passive, private online activities (such as consuming Internet memes or learning about politics) inducing other forms of engagement.

9.2 Conclusion and outlook

This group of studies set out to explore the uses and effects of Internet memes in political contexts. While it provides a first step in doing so, many questions beyond the scope of this thesis remain to be addressed. Below, ways forward in the study of Internet memes are discussed and the contributions this work can make to both scholars and practitioners are highlighted.

First, broadly speaking, understanding the users behind Internet memes as reflective, responsible citizens and taking into account their points of view, as has been done here, allows us to learn from their insights to better understand how people relate to the political realm in converging societies and everyday life. The user perspective can be beneficial to further

research, which should elaborate on this approach by further examining how individuals are drawn to political entertainment, memetic discourse, and informal political participation and how this orientation, in turn, affects them (Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Feldman, 2013; Kim & Vishak, 2008; LaMarre & Grill, 2018; LaMarre et al., 2014). Giving users a voice could also enrich the discussions around depoliticized individuals, apathetic youths, or marginalized communities (Anduiza et al., 2010; Borge & Cardenal, 2011; Coleman, 2006; Schlozman et al., 2010). By acknowledging that individuals are aware of the shortcomings in political information provided through mainstream media systems, the disconnect between everyday citizens and political elites, and the emotionality that exists in online discourse, practitioners working in the field of political communication could develop new avenues via which citizens could voice their grievances and become involved in constructive political discourse. Within the larger discussion of what role the media can and should play when every person can be a citizen journalist, activist, content curator, and selective consumer of political information, interactive media content raises questions about how political information is disseminated, political communication is negotiated, and unconventional forms of citizenship are created and experienced. Including Internet meme users in this conversation, from both a practical and academic perspective, can only enrich the discourse had about spreadable media, citizens, and participatory culture.

Second, Internet memes in the past decade have seemingly become omnipresent; today, we can no longer consider them a fringe phenomenon. In the public realm, Internet memes constitute images of a collective consciousness. Particularly the rise of political Internet memes as ongoing commentary and political talk should be given more thorough consideration. Therefore, another worthwhile avenue for future studies is the examination of

memetic discourse in terms of representing a social, cultural, and political thermometer. As such, tracing and understanding the themes and narratives of political memetic discourse could allow for a better understanding of which arguments are important to citizens and how they negotiate with political life. Systematic observations of memetic and viral trends could also help deepen our understanding of how public discourse is carried out in connection to the traditional media, social movements are formed and propagated, and collectively negotiated digital content lastingly affects individuals and societies (see, e.g., Cornfield, 2017).

Important to note also is the tendency of Internet memes to spread condensed information, a characteristic that meme users situated in a wider context of propaganda (see also Chapter 6.7). As such, it is pertinent to keep in mind that Internet memes can easily spread gossip or false information. In the era of fake news (Bakir & McStay, 2018), any media format that enables an easy and uncontrolled spread of (mis)information should be given special consideration; future research should therefore also take into account the negative ramifications of Internet memes in terms of communicating and spreading subversive, racist, or anti-democratic sentiments (Heikkilä, 2017; Prisk, 2017; Yoon, 2016). This is also another point of interest for scholars and institutions monitoring radicalization processes, as the spread of false information and problematic points of view may also easily take place via Internet memes.

Concretely, the following research questions pertaining to accessibility and exclusion, interactive meme environments, content production, and social identity might prove valuable in follow-up studies to the explorations reported on in this thesis. First, participants in the interview study mentioned that Internet memes could be used to unite people, but also to exclude them (see Chapter 6.7). Further research could thus study the intergroup relations that

take place in meme communities; for example, are members of specific social groups unable to participate in memetic discourse due to the exclusionary nature of meme vernacular? Do Internet memes provide an entry point to politics for only a select few? What effect does the use of Internet memes have on individuals' construction of social identity? Are online communities strengthened by a common meme vernacular? Does the experience of engaging with relatable Internet memes create more perceived likeness with meme users? How do memetic identity constructions translate into memetic discourse?

Furthermore, participants in the interview study also spoke to the superficial nature of Internet memes, providing easy answers to complex social problems. Another avenue for future research could therefore focus on the way users turn to superficial arguments. Do Internet memes reflect racist or misogynous narratives because they simplify complex social issues? Do Internet memes play into the era of fake news by distributing short, simplified, or false pieces of information? Together with the social identity aspect of Internet meme users, future work could also ask whether individuals are more prone to believe information when it is shared by the masses.

From the findings of the survey study and the experiment, it was understood that Internet memes might have a mobilizing effect in some instances, and a slacktivating effect in others. Future works could build on these preliminary findings to test whether the act of creative content production affects users in terms of creating a sense of achievement. Perhaps content production is conducive to a slacktivism effect in terms of producing complacency in active meme users, for instance, when they believe to have produced a societal impact with an online activity. This is also a possible point of entry for participation researchers, who rarely

look at the intended political effect of individuals' political actions (Fox, 2014; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018).

The intention behind this group of studies was not to provide a normative evaluation of Internet memes or of the convergence of spheres that were traditionally independent from politics; however, many scholars have recently begun considering worrisome tendencies in, and of, the media, particularly pertaining to the rise of fake news and emotional rhetoric (Bakir & McStay, 2018), sensationalism (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017), populism, and divided societies (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). From this side of the discourse, similar mechanisms seem to underlie the structure and spread of Internet memes, in that: (1) a social factor is crucial for the spread of an idea; (2) virality happens via social contagion; and (3) users appreciate content when it feels like they have produced it themselves and it has not been prescribed to them. This trend ties into the continuing dissolution of traditional media hierarchies, in which the Internet has long held the status of being a space of subversive, countercultural, and underground debate (Prisk, 2017; Wang et al., 2016), and as contributing to an alternative public sphere (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004). In this sense, Internet memes can be viewed as an opportunity for political communication that exists outside of the traditional hierarchies and top-down political institutions, as well as a challenge for societal trends that weaken the power of classic democratic institutions (Bratich, 2014). Normative frameworks of political participation and political communications typically envision an oversight of citizens' media diets, control of political information, and prescribed avenues of political participation (Domingo et al., 2008; Fox, 2014; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Internet memes, along with other forms of emergent political participation and participatory social media diets, are fundamentally challenging the long-standing

traditions of formal political dialogue and conventional political participation. From the other side of the room, voices have come forward that see a de-hierarchization and popularization of culture in the empowerment of individual actors online (Dahlgren, 2009; Halpern et al., 2017; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Leung, 2009; Margetts et al., 2016; Meyers, 2012). As Dahlgren (2009, p. 138) pointed out, “popular culture can process and communicate collective experience, emotion, and even knowledge; it offers opportunities for negotiating views and opinions on contested values as well as explicit political issues. It can therefore serve as a form of what we might call *metadeliberation*, adding (but certainly not replacing) different forms of expression, different registers, and different emotional spectra to the more traditional forms of news and political communication.”

While we can therefore choose to worry that the popular culture phenomena of our times are weakening political discourse, we can also choose to look at these developments with scientific curiosity. We find ourselves in a time of media upheaval, in which we must and should consider how we can better bridge perspectives from all sides of the table. This perspective allows us to appreciate and critically investigate popular culture and Internet memes as a resource for political citizenship, and continue the study of these converging spheres in our understanding of spreadable media, citizens, and participatory culture.

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Disclaimer

In the following, online images are shown as examples of political Internet memes. Through personal correspondence with the American Psychological Association, I was advised to adhere to the developing citation standard in the field, namely to include the URL from where I retrieved the image (see Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Copyright infringement of these images is in no way intended but may be unavoidable where the original creator/publisher or copyright holder of these images does not correspond with the URL provided. I would therefore like to point out that in using these images I am in accordance with German law (UrhG § 60c) at the time of this dissertation's publication, which permits the use of copyrighted material for scientific, non-commercial purposes, including the distribution to a limited circle of researchers, and to third parties for quality control.

Appendix A

Examples of Internet memes of Russian legislative elections in 2011



Figure A.1 Russian vodka 140% meme [Online image].

Retrieved from https://funnyjunk.com/funny_pictures/3001724/Russian/



Figure A.2 Russian type condom 140% meme [Online image].

Retrieved from https://www.funnyjunk.com/funny_pictures/3012357/Yet

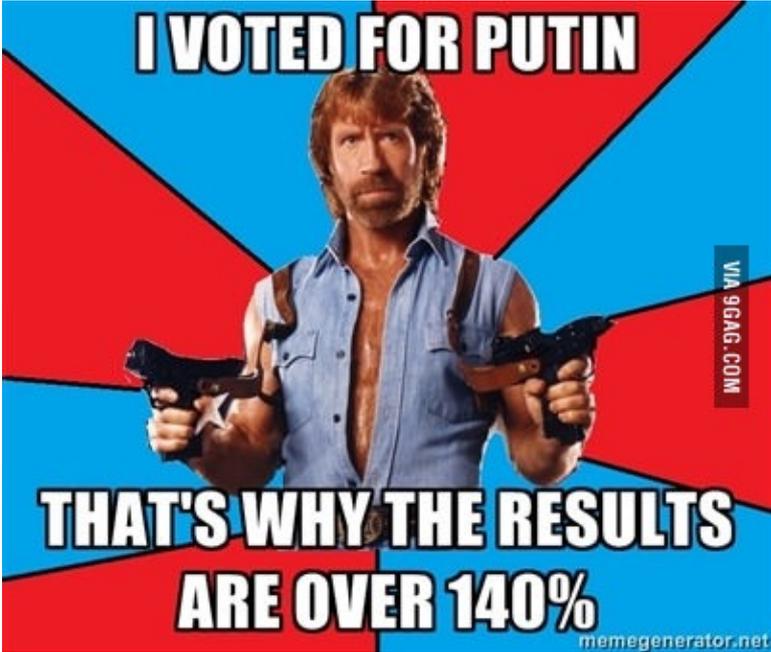


Figure A.3 Chuck Norris voted 140% meme [Online image].

Retrieved from https://images-cdn.9gag.com/photo/1003246_700b.jpg

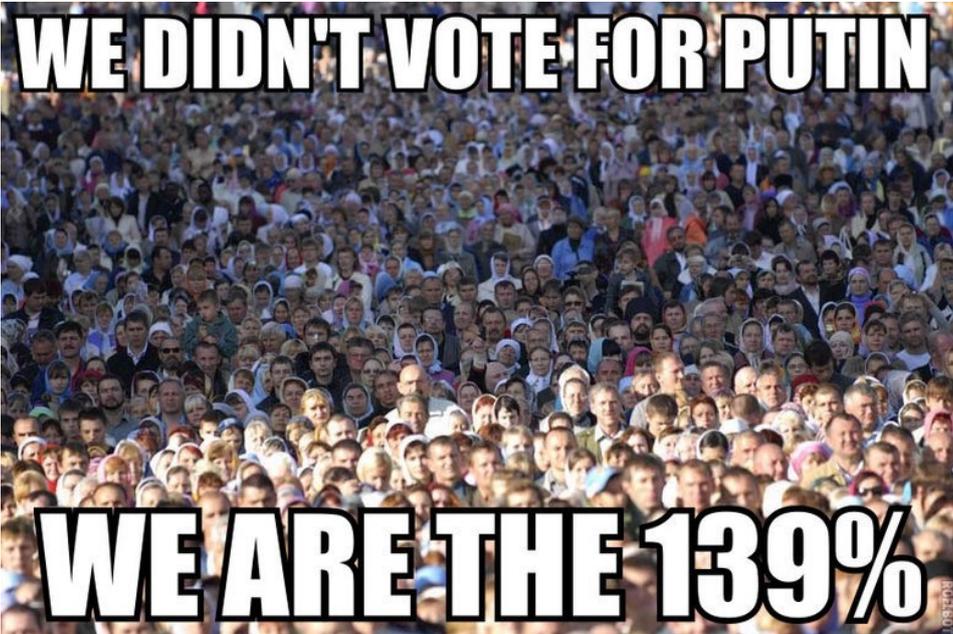


Figure A.4 Occupy Wall Street in Russia 140% meme [Online image].

Retrieved from https://static.fjcdn.com/pictures/We_c999c4_3015116.jpg

Appendix B

Examples of Internet memes of the bendy banana law

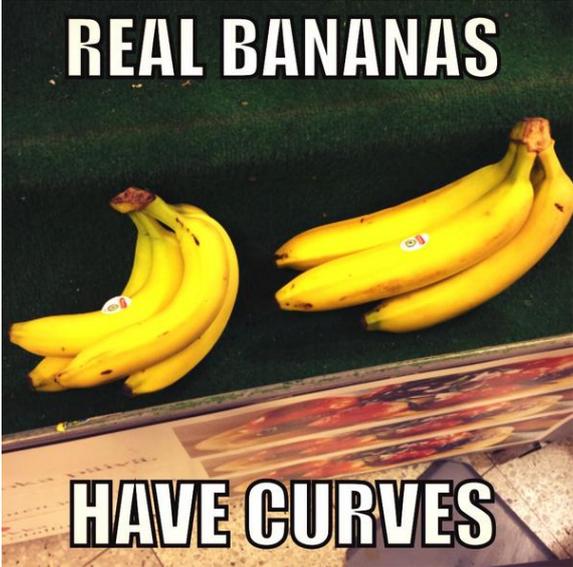


Figure B.1 Real bananas have curves meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B08oUfGIEAAqjpU.jpg:large>



Figure B.2 Reason for Brexit success meme as a tweet [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/skipondown>



Figure B.3 Satirical anti-Brexit banana meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DjgfFxtXsAAfcJS.jpg>



Figure B.4 Anti-Brexit protest with bananas [Online image].

Retrieved from https://media.npr.org/assets/img/2016/06/21/brexitbananas_custom-dfacafdf3a945fd3b50f73ef648705c8c7bac0c6-s800-c85.jpg

Appendix C

Examples of Internet memes of the #MeToo movement



Figure C.1 Maria experienced sexual harassment meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/a1/9e/60/a19e60c3eac898ccf3c84965c1a26b9b.png>



Figure C.3 Kissing without consent meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://www.heyterry.com/blog/tag/men-and-women/>

Pepe le pew faces sexual assault charges after several reports of abuse dating back to 1945



Figure C.3 Pepe Le Pew accused of sexual harassment meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://meme.xyz/uploads/posts/t/1-28427-pepe-le-pew-faces-sexual-assault-charges-after-several-reports-of-abuse-dating-back-to-1945.jpg>



Figure C.4 Donald Trump learned from Pepe Le Pew meme [Online image].

Retrieved <https://memegenerator.net/img/instances/72452818/pepe-lepew-taught-me-how-to-grab-that-pussy.jpg>

Appendix D

Study 1: Meme expert interview guide

Round 1

Dear participant, all your thoughts are valuable so share freely. When applicable, please adhere to the minimum word count but feel free to write more if you like. If a question is difficult to answer, try coming back to it at a later time. If it is unclear or impossible to answer, please contact me.

1. How would you define “internet meme²¹”? Please don’t look up a definition but come up with your own.
2. What different types of memes are there? Describe the categories and explain or give examples of memes (you can include images or links).
3. What attracts you to internet memes? What makes them interesting for you?
4. Please describe a typical internet meme user (person who creates, shares, comments on, and looks at internet memes). Be as specific as possible, tell me about his/her interests, thoughts, ideas, visions for the future, and anything else that comes to mind.

²¹ Please note that although *Internet* is the correct spelling, all materials provided to participants adapted the more colloquial form *internet*.

5. Do you think internet memes are powerful? If so, how are they powerful? What power do they hold over whom?

6. Is there a difference behind the motivations to look at memes, share memes, produce memes, and interact with memes (i.e., leave comments and engage in discussions with other users)? What could be the different motivations for each behavior?

The following questions will ask about internet memes that are about social/political issues. They are referred to here as political internet memes.

7. What do you think someone can gain from producing or sharing a political internet meme? If you have trouble with this question, think of a social or political movement, maybe even in your country, where memes played a role. Why do people get involved in online movements through sharing viral content?

8. What is the difference behind the motivations to use political internet memes and non-political internet memes?

9. Why do people interact with political memes instead of just reading the news?

10. How are people who have grown up with the internet (sometimes called “digital natives”) different from those who have not?

If you have any more thoughts, ideas, or questions, please feel free to share them here:

Round 2

In this round, all the text found in “quotations” is from the voice of other participants.

1. Home is where the wifi connects automatically. Why does the internet make people feel at home? For meme users, do memes make people feel at home?
2. “Using memes makes people feel like internet people.” Explain what this statement makes you think of.
3. Meme users like feeling understood by likeminded people who have the same interests and have “consumed the same kind of media and therefore have developed a similar cultural identity.” What can you say about the feeling of group identity meme users experience?
4. Imagine all the types of people who actively seek out memes (not the ones who only happen to haphazardly glance at memes on their NewsFeed). These active meme users might create, share, comment on, like, or look at memes, or any of the combinations thereof. Which groups/categories can you think of to give an overview of meme users? (for example: First Day on the Internet Kids, casual users, trolls, hackers, Anonymous, hardcore meme users etc.). Please come up with **2–5 groups of meme users**. You can name them anything you like, and please also describe them in a few sentences or bullet points so I know **who** they are, and **how** and **why** they use memes.

5. Do people who **produce** memes feel they have the ability to produce a meme that is popular and can go viral? Could this ability be related to their motivation for producing a meme?
6. In Round 1 several participants mentioned that in order to use internet memes, one must be “in on the joke.” Some also mentioned this creates a “feeling of superiority” over people who don’t get the joke. Do meme users want to feel superior? Do they want to show off?
7. Some media theories discuss ritualized or habitual behavior. This means that initially people seek media to satisfy certain needs but after a while their behavior is no longer conscious. For example, someone might have the habit of turning on their TV every night when they come home from work without thinking about why they do it. Their initial TV-watching behavior may have been prompted by a need for relaxation but after a while it doesn’t matter whether TV watching is relaxing because it becomes a habit. What do you think about the idea of habitual internet meme use? Do people use memes without thinking about it and consciously deciding to use them? Do they initially have a different motivation to seek out memes? How does their motivation change over time?
8. In psychology we talk about *sense of agency* as your ability to take action, be effective, influence your own life, and assume responsibility for your behavior. Sense of agency is essential for us to feel in control of our life. As many participants in Round 1 mentioned, internet memes are fast and effortless. They are viewed by many and are therefore very

reactive. Do you think people who create/share internet memes **perceive** a sense of agency by creating and sharing content that many other people view and immediately react to?

9. Slacktivism: feel-good measures, in support of an issue or social cause, that have little or no practical effect other than to make the person doing it take satisfaction from the feeling they have contributed. (source: Wikipedia). Is it only an illusion that people can have an impact and exert influence on other people online by creating, sharing, and commenting on (political) memes?

10. Research found that viewing politically satirical television shows (e.g., The Daily Show) made viewers feel more cynical about the government and the mainstream news media. However, the viewers also reported higher levels of internal efficacy, which is the confidence to successfully deal with politics. This may in fact be true because viewers of The Daily Show are more knowledgeable about politics than non-viewers of The Daily Show, even when age and socio-economic background was taken into account. Do you think this could be true for political internet meme users? Do political meme users feel more cynical about political institutions and mainstream media, but also feel more confident in being able to deal with political processes? And do you think political internet meme users are politically knowledgeable?

11. How do people who create and share political content online envision policy making and political processes? Do they see an opportunity for a different sort of political involvement

as people who don't create and share political content online?

12. What makes an internet meme political? Is the Obama Not Bad Meme political because there is a politician in the image? In your opinion, does the meme have to fulfill a certain role or function in order to be political?

If you have any more thoughts, ideas, or questions, please feel free to share them here:

Round 3

Dear participant, I starting out with broad questions and am now narrowing them down, hence some questions might seem redundant to you especially if you have already alluded to these points.

1. **Political internet meme:** “An element of cultural transmission (usually expressed in the form of text, a still image, a moving image, or audio), shared via the internet, that describes, ridicules, and often criticizes political actors, political events, or topical political issues.”

What comes to mind when reading this definition? You can use bullet points or full sentences.

2. What do you think makes internet memes go viral? You can use bullet points.

3. “Producing and sharing internet memes is an inherently social activity and always relies on the reception and feedback of others.” Please share your thoughts about this sentence.

4. “People on the internet naturally have more agency and have adapted a different way of communication created and developed by the internet. This often clashes with the way the political systems are set up, and therefore people feel like they don’t have an effect on politics. Then they have a good laugh by creating memes rather than taking a serious political stance.” What do you think about this statement? What is the relationship between political internet memes and civic engagement, in your experience or opinion?

5. The following questions ask about motivations for using (political) internet memes. One of the approaches to understanding why people use media proposes that people actively seek out specific media to satisfy certain needs. For example, television has been found to generally serve entertainment and relaxation needs. There is research on needs that are satisfied by generating content (for example writing Wikipedia articles, writing political blogs, uploading Youtube videos, etc). Since there is very little research on internet memes, I have drawn on research about user-generated content and social media use in order to understand the motivations behind (political) internet memes. If some questions seem out of context or absurd, please mention it but nevertheless try to answer to the best of your ability.

5.1 In the case of Wikipedians, people who contribute articles, they often believe every has a right to free knowledge and information. Do you think there is an **ideology** that may

play a role in why meme users create and share memes?

5.2 Do people seek out (political) internet memes hoping to **learn** something? Do you think someone can learn something from interacting with (political) internet memes?

5.3. Does meme use make people feel less **lonely**? If so, how?

5.4 What role do you think the community plays for internet meme users? Do people feel involved in a **community** when they look at/produce/share/comment on (political) internet memes?

5.5 Is there a **group identity** for (political) internet meme users? Do you think they feel they belong together and identify with other members of that group? If so, what is this group identity based on? What could be the shared values or shared beliefs?

5.6 Do people learn more about themselves by using (political) internet memes? In how far do internet memes help them find out more about their **individual identity**?

5.7 Do people choose to consume internet memes in order to **escape** from their life? For political internet memes, do people use memes to escape from debates in the mainstream media?

5.8 Do people seek out (political) internet memes for **fun or entertainment**?

5.9 Do people like/appreciate the **feedback** they receive from producing or sharing a meme? Do you think these reactions from other users have an effect on how the person sees his or herself? Does it bolster their self-esteem or help them define themselves?

5.10 Do internet memes help people express themselves? Is **self-expression** a motivation for people to use (political) internet memes?

6. Media psychological theories from the direction of Social Cognitive Theory proposes that behavior is not only determined by the motivation to do something but also by the perceived ability to do it. For example, someone who doesn't believe they can "correctly" use the internet, is very unlikely to do so. In the context of memes, people would need to believe that they can create memes that are popular, that can influence others, or that are powerful. The following three questions will therefore ask about these perceived abilities. They might sound very similar to questions from Round 1 and Round 2 and you may have already alluded to this in your previous answers. Nevertheless, I'd appreciate it if you would try to answer these questions as best you can.

6.1 Do people who use memes feel they have the power to influence society? If so, what kind of influence? Is this belief related to their motivation for producing or sharing memes?

6.2 How do people who use (political) internet memes feel capable of being involved in

socio-political processes through meme use?

6.3 Do people who create memes feel confident in being able to create (viral) memes? Is this a prerequisite to create a meme? Or would you say it is more of a trial-and-error behavior?

7. “Memes are dangerous and can easily be used for propaganda purposes to manipulate people. People therefore need to be responsible in how they use memes.”

“Memes are a type of democracy because you get so many points of view and among them you will find a good consensus.” Do the two statements above contradict each other or can they be merged? What do you think about the menace of memes (also see: <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2014/11/the-menace-of-memes-how-pictures-can-paint-a-thousand-lies/>)

8. What form of political participation do you find the most effective way to make your voice heard?

If you have any more thoughts, ideas, or questions, please feel free to share them here:

Appendix E

Study 2: Items and scales of all measures

Table E. Study 2: Items and Scales of all Measures

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Meme use	Do you use internet memes?	
	I look at Internet memes.	1 = always
	I share Internet memes.	2 = often
	I comment on Internet memes.	3 = sometimes
	I create Internet memes.	4 = never
Political meme use	I am interested in Internet memes that are...	
	... political.	1 = strongly agree
		2 = agree
		3 = undecided
		4 = disagree
	5 = strongly disagree	
Political meme efficacy	How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?	
	Popular memes can influence politicians or other people in power.	1 = strongly agree
		2 = agree
	Memes can affect the opinions of voters.	3 = undecided
	Meme users have considerable influence over the government.	4 = disagree
		5 = strongly disagree
Political interest	How interested would you say you are in politics?	
		1 = very interested
		2 = somewhat interested
		3 = not very interested
		4 = not at all

Table E. *Study 2: Items and Scales of all Measures*

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Conventional political participation	During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following to try to improve things in your country?	
	Contacted a politician, government or local government official?	1 = yes 2 = no
	Worked in a political party or action group?	
	Signed an offline petition?	
	Worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?	
	Taken part in a lawful public demonstration?	
	Boycotted certain products?	
Unconventional political participation	During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following to try to improve things in your country?	
	Shared on social media that you have participated in an election?	1 = yes 2 = no
	Engaged in a political discussion on the Internet?	
	Signed an online petition?	
	Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons?	
	Donated money to a political organization or group?	
	Participated in illegal protest activities? Done volunteer work?	
Political trust	How much do you personally trust each of the following institutions in your country?	
	The parliament	1 = no trust
	The legal system	...
	The electoral system	11 = complete trust
	The police	
	Politicians	
	Political parties	
	The media	
The United Nations		

Appendix F

Study 2: Means, standard deviations, and correlations of all measures

Table F. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of all Measures

Variable	<i>M</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
Meme use	1.89 (.58)						
Political meme use	3.40 (1.12)	.290***					
Political meme efficacy	3.06 (.55)	.116*	.079				
Political interest	3.30 (.71)	.014	.351***	-.002			
Conventional political participation	.35 (.26)	.123*	.240***	.079	.429***		
Unconventional political participation	.47 (.24)	.210***	.310***	.071	.454***	.636***	
Political trust	6.10 (2.02)	-.024	.004	-.196***	.003	-.120*	-.159**

Note. Standard deviation in parenthesis; * indicates $p < 0.05$; ** indicates $p < 0.01$; *** indicates $p < 0.001$

Appendix G

Study 3: Memes evaluated in the consumer condition

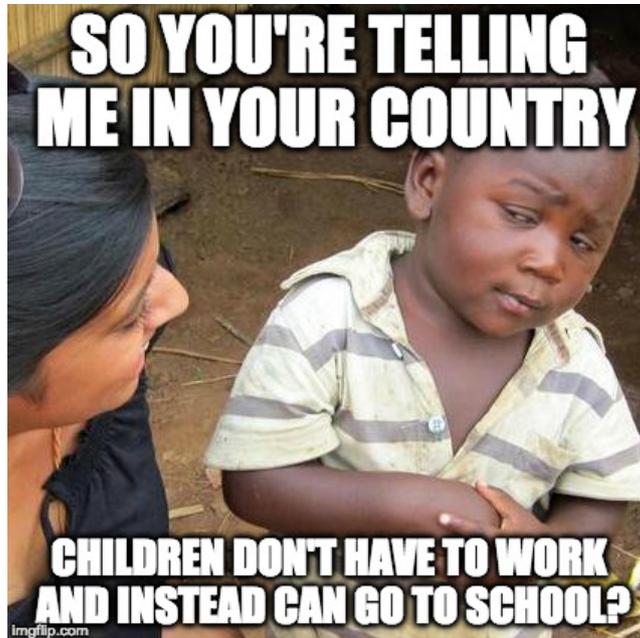


Figure G.1 Skeptical Third World Kid meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>

Figure G.2 Futurama Fry/Not Sure If meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>



Figure G.3 All the Things meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>



Figure G.4 But That's None of My Business meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>



Figure G.5 “Not Bad” Obama Face meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>



Figure G.6 One Does Not Simply meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>



Figure G.7 Annoyed Picard meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>



Figure G.8 Question Rage Face meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>



Figure G.9 Rage Guy meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>

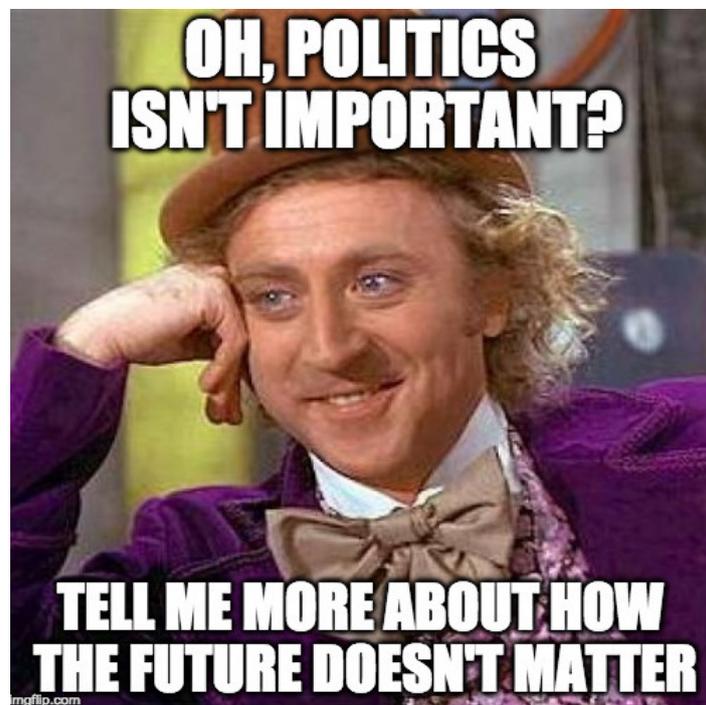


Figure G.10 Condescending Wonka meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>

Appendix H

Study 3: Text on equal access to education in West Africa

Adapted from www.worldbank.org and www.theguardian.com

Investing in Education in West Africa

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Poverty remains one of the biggest barriers preventing children from accessing education
 - Closing the gender gap in education is crucial for economic growth
 - Individual approaches aim to empower people from less affluent backgrounds
-

WASHINGTON, July 29, 2016 - In the last 10 years, many West African countries have made extraordinary gains in terms of education. Across the sub-region more students are completing primary school than ever before. Nevertheless, poverty remains the main barrier preventing children from staying in education. Drop-out rates are still problematic as many children are expected to work at a young age. Young women often have the added disadvantage of being expected to marry and raise a family.

Child labor and poor access to education are common problems across Africa, but some countries are investing heavily into education. Senegal, for example, is in a better position than many of its neighbors. Independence from France in 1960 passed relatively smoothly and Senegal has no scars from civil war. In fact, the country is now seen as one of the most stable in Africa. However, it is still one of the poorest in the world, chiefly because it has limited

natural resources and is predominantly rural. According to UNICEF 22% of the population live on less than a dollar a day.

The Senegalese government has shown its commitment to education, allocating 40% of the budget to the education sector, but the latest figures from the ministry of education show that only around 65% of children attend primary school. Just 21% continue on to secondary school and 9% pass the exam that allows them to continue on to higher education.

Closing the gender gap is one way to invest in the future of a country. When mothers are educated, delay marriage and childbearing, participate in the labor market, and don't tolerate domestic violence, their daughters are more likely to grow up sharing those characteristics.

Additionally, in order for students from various economic backgrounds to attain higher levels of education, financial aid and affordable schooling is needed. Gains are being made to provide more scholarships in order to counter the gap between rich and poor. Some of these initiatives are being undertaken from within the country, others come from NGOs abroad. More needs to be done to ensure a more educated youth will be ready to lead West African countries in years to come.

Appendix I

Study 3: Items and scales of all measures

Table I. Study 3: Items and Scales of all Measures

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Manipulation check	Please indicate if the following statements are true or false: Poverty remains one of the biggest barriers preventing children from accessing education. Many families expect their children to work and therefore cannot afford to send them to school. Closing the gender gap in education is not helpful. Affordable schooling and scholarships are needed to help students from less affluent backgrounds.	true/false
Topic interest	Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements: This topic is important to me personally. This is a topic about which I would like to learn more. This is an issue I would like to get involved with. I am interested in global education initiatives.	1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree
Topic bias	Have you ever travelled to West Africa? Have you ever travelled to Senegal?	yes/no
Emotional thermometer	I am feeling... ... relaxed. ... joyful. ... sad. ... frustrated. ... interested. ... angry. ... enthusiastic. ... bored.	1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree

Table I. *Study 3: Items and Scales of all Measures*

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Meme use	Do you use internet memes?	
	I look at Internet memes.	1 = never
	I share Internet memes.	2 = sometimes
	I comment on Internet memes.	3 = often
	I create Internet memes.	4 = always
Type of meme use	I am interested in internet memes that are...	
	... political.	1 = strongly disagree
	... about a social cause.	2 = disagree
	... relatable.	3 = undecided
	... funny.	4 = agree
	... informative.	5 = strongly agree
	... critical.	
	... viral.	
Political meme efficacy 1	People have different views about internet memes and their impact on society. Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:	
	Popular memes can influence politicians or other people in power.	1 = strongly disagree
	Memes can affect the opinions of voters.	2 = disagree
	Meme users have considerable influence over the government.	3 = undecided
	Memes are fun but nothing more. (R)	4 = agree
		5 = strongly agree
Meme evaluation (only Consumers)	Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:	
	I like this meme.	1 = strongly disagree
	I think this meme is funny.	2 = disagree
	I think this meme is clever.	3 = undecided
	I think this meme is impactful.	4 = agree
	I think this meme is appropriate.	5 = strongly agree

Table I. *Study 3: Items and Scales of all Measures*

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Task evaluation	How difficult did you find the task in today's study?	1 = not at all 2 = not very difficult 3 = somewhat difficult 4 = very difficult
Political meme efficacy 2	Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements: To what degree would you say these memes are an effective way to raise awareness on this issue? To what degree do you think these memes would impact other people's opinions and attitudes about the issue?	1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree
Political interest	How interested would you say you are in politics?	1 = not at all 2 = not very interested 3 = somewhat interested 4 = very interested
Voting	When election take place how often do you participate by casting your vote on the local level? When election take place how often do you participate by casting your vote on the national level?	1 = never 2 = usually 3 = always
Political participation	There are different ways of trying to impact socio-political issues, improve things in your community or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Contacted a politician, government or local government official? Worked in a political party or action group?	yes/no

Table I. *Study 3: Items and Scales of all Measures*

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Political participation (cont.)	<p>Worked in another organization or association?</p> <p>Worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?</p> <p>Shared on Facebook or other social media that you have participated in an election?</p> <p>Shared on Facebook or other social media that you support a socio-political movement or idea?</p> <p>Signed an offline petition?</p> <p>Signed an online petition?</p> <p>Taken part in a public demonstration?</p> <p>Boycotted certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons?</p> <p>Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons?</p> <p>Donated money to a political organization or group?</p> <p>Participated in protest activities?</p> <p>Done volunteer work?</p>	yes/no
Civic engagement	<p>The following is a list of organizations people join voluntarily and for different reasons. Please indicate whether you are, or have ever been a member of any of them.</p> <p>Church or religious organization</p> <p>Sport or recreational organization</p> <p>Art, music or educational organization</p> <p>Labor union</p> <p>Political party</p> <p>Environmental organization</p> <p>Professional organization</p> <p>Humanitarian or charitable organization</p> <p>Consumer organization</p> <p>Self-help group, mutual aid group</p> <p>Other organization</p>	<p>1 = don't belong</p> <p>2 = inactive member</p> <p>3 = active member</p>

Table I. *Study 3: Items and Scales of all Measures*

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Political trust	How much do you personally trust each of the following institutions?	
	Your country's parliament	1 = no trust
	Your country's legal system	...
	The police	11 = complete trust
	Politicians	
	Political parties	
	The EU	
	The United Nations	
Political efficacy	Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:	
	I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics.	1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree
	I think that I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people.	3 = undecided 4 = agree
	People like me do not have any say about what the government does. (R)	5 = strongly agree
	There are many legal ways for citizens to successfully influence what the government does.	
Satisfaction with involvement	Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:	
	I am satisfied with my involvement in politics.	1 = strongly disagree
	I am satisfied with my involvement in my community.	2 = disagree 3 = undecided
	I am satisfied with the impact my socio-political involvement has on society.	4 = agree 5 = strongly agree
Political opinion	Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:	
	I believe that high-level politics barely impact day-to-day life of the community.	1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree
	I believe that grass-roots movements barely impact day-to-day life of the community.	3 = undecided 4 = agree
		5 = strongly agree

Table I. *Study 3: Items and Scales of all Measures*

Variable	Item(s)	Scale
Reputation management	<p>Please indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements:</p> <p>I'm always willing to admit when I make a mistake.</p> <p>I always try to practice what I preach.</p> <p>I never resent being asked to return a favor.</p> <p>I have never been annoyed when people expressed ideas very different from my own.</p> <p>I have deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings. (R)</p> <p>I like gossip at times. (R)</p> <p>There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone. (R)</p> <p>I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget. (R)</p> <p>There have been occasions when I felt like smashing things.</p> <p>Sometimes I tell lies.</p> <p>I have said something bad about a friend before.</p> <p>I avoid listening when people have different opinions.</p> <p>I never take things I am not supposed to.</p>	<p>1 = strongly disagree</p> <p>2 = disagree</p> <p>3 = undecided</p> <p>4 = agree</p> <p>5 = strongly agree</p>

Appendix J

Examples of Internet memes reflective of their political role



Figure J.1 Condescending Wonka on politics meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://viralpoliticsblog.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/wonka-political-meme.jpg?w=656>



Figure J. 2 Parody of French flag profile avatar meme [Online image].

Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/3tepel/im_helping/



Figure J.3 Politics on the Internet meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://i.imgflip.com/10b8yr.jpg>



Figure J.4 Jokes are not political statements meme [Online image].

Retrieved from <https://me.me/i/if-you-could-stop-treating-jokes-like-serious-political-statements-11850805>

Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own original thought, unless otherwise referenced, and that it was completed without any unauthorized aids. All utilized aids and sources are properly referenced in the text. All external excerpts and ideas are also properly referenced. I certify that none of the work in this dissertation was plagiarized, consistent with academic ethics and the honor codes of the University of Bremen and Jacobs University Bremen.

Bremen, 31 January, 2019

Anne Leiser