# Politics of Internet Memes

How Dutch University Students Give Meaning to Political Internet Memes

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# Abstract

This study looks at the meaning Dutch university students give to political internet memes and how this meaning relates to their political attitudes and behavior. In order to provide a better understanding of the meaning these Dutch students give to political internet memes, this research deviated from the quantitative nature of similar studies and did online focus groups instead. The online focus groups enabled participants from various locations in the Netherlands to interact with one another simultaneously. The results show the participants have clear political standpoints and are not reliant on internet memes as a way of influencing their political attitudes and behaviour. Internet memes function as a way of relatability, which is a perquisite of an internet meme to be funny. Furthermore, internet memes serve as a way of social validation in which memes that university students agree with reinforces their beliefs. However, a meme that university students disagree with can cause frustration and even polarization. An aspect that is not was mentioned in previous literature is the role of serendipity. Serendipity is the chance for someone to encounter something that they did not expect. Also, the temporality of an internet meme matters whether university students consider this internet meme funny or not. An internet meme would be shown at its best shortly after it was created and can get quickly outdated. Lastly, recommendations have been made for future research.

Keywords: internet memes, political attitudes, serendipity, social validation, temporality

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# Table of Contents

# Introduction

*"They [political parties] do everything to appeal to the young voter. Politicians have been vlogging and sharing private information on Instagram. Memes are also part of that online strategy. Parties now even specifically target young people with Facebook ads."*

- Sanne Kruikemeier in Het Parool by Stöve (2020)

This quote shows how political parties are using social media platforms to attract a younger audience. Internet memes are a part of that key strategy because of their satirical nature. In this same article of Het Parool, various examples of political actors were given that promote their ideologies. Examples of political actors that have used internet memes to spread their ideologies are DWARS, the youth wing of the GreenLeft[1] party in the Netherlands and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy[2], the latter whose Instagram account is filled with political internet memes.

However, it is not only political parties that share political internet memes. There are various non-political actors distribute these political internet memes as well. Examples of these non-political actors in the Netherlands are 'Memes voor de Massa' and 'FvDMeems'[3]. These non-political actors are prevalent in the form of left-wing and right-wing groups and spread satirical memes that provide social commentary on contemporary political situations and distribute them through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Although political internet memes can be used as a way of promoting political parties and ideologies, they also enable political activism and play a role in certain protest movements and political debates (Leiser, 2019). These protest movements and political debates range from diverse political topics such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement (Milner, 2013) to the drone bombings during the presidency of Barack Obama (Howley, 2016). These political internet memes encourage non-traditional political actors to criticize political authorities and enables political engagement in various topics (Howley, 2016) and help developing a stand on political viewpoints (Heiskanen, 2017).

It is this usage of political internet memes by both political and non-political actors that show the relevancy of internet memes. Namely, that internet memes are a contemporary phenomenon that are used to provide humour and/or social commentary (Knobel & Lankshear,

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[1] In Dutch, this political party is named GroenLinks.
[2] In Dutch, this political party is named Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, abbreviated to VVD.
[3] This group shares internet memes that are associated with the political party Forum for Democracy but, this group is not affiliated with the political party itself.

2007). Despite the relevance of appealing to a younger audience and the usage of political internet memes by different actors, political internet memes are still an under researched contemporary phenomenon (Shomova, 2019).

Previous research on political internet memes and political attitudes and behaviour has been conducted using quantitative research methods. Namely the use of questionnaires (Kulkarni, 2017), organized polls (Malhotra, 2019) and experimental research on university students (Klein, 2019). All these quantitative studies show no significant relationship between political internet memes and political attitudes and behaviour. This raises the question on why political parties still use political internet memes to target young people, despite scientific research showing no significant relationship. This master's thesis looks at this relationship again from the perspectives of young people and like Klein (2019), looks at university students as a proxy for young people. Previous studies have shown that university students enjoy engaging topics about internet memes, which would likely make them easier to agree with partaking in this study (Wells, 2018).

This study aims to provide new insights in this area of research, to diverge from the quantitative research methods used by previous authors and use qualitative research methods instead. Through qualitative research methods, this study looks at the meaning young people give to political internet memes. In this research, focus groups consisting of university students were used to gather data, allowing nuanced interpretation of the meaning of political internet memes given by university students, but also in relation to and interacting with fellow peers.

The aim of using focus groups is also to see whether these students relate this meaning to their political attitudes and behaviour. Most notably, this research will focus on university students in the Netherlands. In order to understand how these internet memes affect the political attitudes and behaviour of people these students in the Netherlands, this master's thesis aims to answer the following research question: *How do Dutch university students give meaning to political internet memes and how does this meaning affect their political attitudes and behaviour?*

# Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework is divided into three sections. The first section gives an overview of what internet memes are and what is involved in their transmission. Additionally, the context in which a meme takes place and their temporality is discussed. The second section will explain how internet memes are used for social validation and how they are cues for showing political ideas and standpoints. The last section talks about the political consequences of internet memes and how they can lead to polarization.

## Transmission of Internet memes

Before the start of the digital era, Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the term 'meme' in his book *The Selfish Gene.* He describes memes as units of cultural transmission. According to Dawkins (1976), these units range from catchphrases and clothing fashions to religious ideas such as the belief in God. These cultural units are imitated and transmitted between individuals of a group. With the emergence of the internet, the term 'meme' was also applied to content that spread from user to user online.

The internet allows this content to spread to large groups of users faster than offline methods. Whereas information and political messages that are distributed offline are dependent on the speed of the messenger sending it, the internet delivers this content instantly to large groups of people through social networking (Burroughs, 2013). These people are reached with the intention of facilitating conversation between different groups of people. This is done through either sharing what they find interesting or to provoke these very same people (Chagas et al., 2019). The people who create and share these internet memes are often amateur content creators who are close to the masses when it comes to knowing their feelings and sensibilities. These amateurs are non-political actors who share the memes they create with ordinary individuals through social media platforms.

When it comes to sharing these memes, Shifman (2014) refers to Berger and Milkman (2012) who found that people are more likely to share positive stories rather than negative stories. Furthermore, they stated that people are more likely to share items that are perceived as surprising, interesting or useful. They explain that these preferences are the motivations for users to post content online. Video's that were considered funny or were positively evaluated were more likely to be shared and sent forward by people (Guadagno et al., 2013). These uploaders prefer spreading content that makes others feel good and at the same time reflects themselves as entertaining. Internet memes are also a way of belonging (Casey, 2018). Sharing memes with one another acknowledges the relationship people have with each other (DeAtley,

2014). Therefore, sharing information with a large group of friends makes it easier to engage in shared emotions and increase group solidarity.

However, when it comes to internet memes there is an exclusivity present when forming groups. According to Leiser (2019), people who are not well-versed in what she refers to as the 'meme language', (meaning being knowledgeable with how internet memes portray everyday experiences) are excluded from being part of this subculture. At the same time, those that are well-versed in the meme language are strengthened in their bonds. Also, being part of the meme subculture is not enough to understand an internet meme. These internet memes can only be understood by people who know the context in which they take place. In other words, the context in which internet memes take place must be relatable to those that consume them (Sălcudean & Motoroiu, 2020).

Another important aspect of the transmission of internet memes is their temporality. Bryant & Knight (2019) state that media messages such as internet memes stay relevant by matching contemporary worldviews. For internet memes to stay relevant, they are dependent on their ability to replicate, imitate and adapt to new ideas and contexts. In this research, I expect that the temporality of internet memes affects the perspectives of university students on internet memes as well. Chandler (2013) mentions three conditions for an internet meme to stay relevant which are based on the work of Dawkins (1976). There conditions are longevity, fecundity and copying-fidelity. Of these three conditions, only longevity and fecundity are relevant for this research.

First, there is the 'longevity', which is the lifespan of the meme itself. It is the time it takes for a meme to last and not become outdated. The longer a meme stays relevant, the more it can be copied and transmitted to new groups of people (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Chandler (2013) gave an example of the 'First World Problems' meme that lasted over two years at the time of his research, which showed how long such a meme could last. Second, there is the 'fecundity' of the meme, which refers to how widely a meme is spread. The ability for an internet meme to spread is supported by many meme generators available. In order for someone to create a meme, they only need to seek the image of the meme and enter the desired text. These memes are shared, and this enables a meme to spread further over the internet (Procházka, 2014). Similar to longevity, Chandler (2013) gives the 'First World Problems' meme as an example of a meme that has been applied to different contexts and is therefore spread widely over the internet.

## Social Validation

An important aspect that plays a role in which memes are shared is social validation. According to Guadnago et al. (2013), social validation is the tendency for individuals to look at others to evaluate whether their own behavior is the correct or appropriate way according to the collective group. As such, internet memes function as performative acts where a person decides to ratify or oppose a specific situation, depending on their interpretation of that specific context. Based on those interpretations, meme creators adjust their memes accordingly before sharing them with others (Sălcudean & Motoroiu, 2020).

This social validation plays a role in environments where it is not clear which actions are considered the right or wrong thing to do or believe. Ideas and stereotypes people have, often manifested in internet memes, can be reinforced or opposed, which could lead to polarization. To give an indication of how memes can reinforce or opposed, Shifman (2014) uses Milner's (2012) example of the ''Successful Black Man'' meme. This meme shows a stock photo of a man with a dark skin color in a tuxedo. The meme itself hints at racial presumptions that differentiate ''successful black men'' from "regular black men", implicating that they are usually two different categories. Therefore, the meme reinforces stereotypes by presenting exceptions that proves the rule. At the same time Shifman (2014) states that this meme challenges the readers invisible racist assumptions by presenting a counterexample to them. This second part of the meme can therefore 'punish' readers for their initial stereotypical reading of the meme. In this way, the role internet memes play in influencing (political) attitudes and behaviors becomes apparent.

Internet memes are a quick and easy way to obtain this social validation because of their short and easy text. Therefore, internet memes can be considered cues, which are signals and messages that are easy to take hold of (Bolsen 2014). This is because internet memes require less effort and resources to obtain and people can compare various perceptions such as political viewpoints to that of the collective group. At the same time, internet memes cannot give a full understanding of political issues, because of their short text (Leiser 2019). However, for people who cannot comprehend the complexity of contemporary issues, these internet memes function as cues. These cues can serve a substitute for encyclopedic knowledge (Lupia 1994). However, Van der Meer & Hakhverdian (2016) state that higher educated people are more likely to have acquired the necessary skills to judge political institutions on performance and processes instead of general media messages such as internet memes. Therefore, higher educated people are less reliant on cues such as internet memes. As university students have a higher education, I assume

that the participants of this research will not be reliant of internet memes as cues for their political standpoints.

## Political consequences of internet memes

When used strategically, internet memes can 'expose various political actors to the ridiculous' (Chagas et al., 2019, par. 3) to bring attention to contemporary political issues. Internet memes were not the first methods of political communication to ridicule political actors. They can be considered as successors to editorial cartoons because they deconstruct complex ideas through the use of symbolic images (Huntington, 2013). According to Dougherty (2002), cartoons show an argument and can provoke people. Similarly, political internet memes show ideas where people can identify, distance or oppose themselves with. Consequently, people are able to show political allegiance towards a certain idea or group and therefore form groups (Dean, 2019).

Although it has been stated before that internet memes are made by amateurs, politics are also conducted through the use of internet memes. Political internet memes are often used by political actors to engage people with politics. Said actors may use internet memes for various goals such as drawing attention to specific political issues or delegitimizing political opponents. Their capacity to mock political actors and thus portraying them negatively can cause stigmatization and negative connotations attached to these political actors (Dean, 2019). However, political internet memes can help different political actors to be portrayed positively. During the general elections of 2017 in the United Kingdom, the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn was compared favourably to the Star Wars character Obi-Wan Kenobi. This comparison formed the meme 'Obi-Wan Corbyn' (see figure 2) which would depict Corbyn in a heroic matter (Dean, 2019).

Such internet memes are quite accessible and an easy instrument to convey a political message. At the same time, these political internet memes can be considered sensationalist and propaganda for specific political parties (Leiser, 2019). These forms of political internet memes can also lead to polarization. An example of a meme that could lead to polarization is a meme about Geert Wilders (See figure 2). In this meme, Geert Wilders head is pasted on a poster of the movie "Saving Private Ryan" and portrayed as a savior against "Islamification". Klein (2019) stated that this meme was received positively among students. Even though such a meme can be received positively or negatively, these political internet memes can lead to polarization by evoking responses to stigmatize specific social groups, in this case Muslims, and marking them negatively (Juan Manuel & Makhortykh, 2019).

| Figure 1: 'Obi Wan Corbyn' Source: Dean (2019), Originally Posted by @DylanStrain on twitter on 04-08-2015. | Figure 2: Geert Wilders Saving Private Holland. Retrieved from: Klein (2019) |
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# Methodology

In order to understand how political internet memes affect university students, this research uses qualitative research methods. Qualitative research enables the understanding of social phenomena and the meaning people give to them (Boeije, 2014). Within the context of this research, qualitative research methods enable the research to focus on how people react to certain internet memes, what meaning they give to these internet memes and how this meaning relates to their political attitudes and behavior. The research method that is used in this research are focus groups. The participants were selected through two forms of sampling, which are convenience sampling and snowball sampling. First, respondents were recruited through my personal network. Second, I asked these respondents for other potential participants. Through the use of convenience sampling and snowball sampling, I was able to gain a diverse group of participants from all sides of the political left-right spectrum. A total of 25 participants divided over four focus groups participated in this research. The participants have been anonymized and pseudonyms have been used to describe the participants.

Although this research initially aimed to have focus groups and interviews where the participants were physically present in the same space, the COVID-19 outbreak in the Netherlands rendered these forms of meetings impossible. Therefore, the video calling platform Skype was used as a tool to conduct my research methods. Skype has two functions that can simulate a focus group. The first one is the webcam function: people could still see each other as in a physical group meeting. The second function is the recording function. This function enabled me to record the focus groups as videos, which is convenient for data gathering and transcribing.

The advantage of focus groups is that they enable interaction among people when being interviewed (Boeije, 2014). Not only do focus group measure the interaction among those that participate, but also clarify and explore different shared perspectives (Tong et al, 2007). As mentioned in the theoretical framework, internet memes can serve as cues for social validation and through focus groups this social validation or the differences in social norms can be observed. The similarities and differences in social norms will be measured in focus groups through showing different political internet memes to the participants of the same focus group Each focus group lasted two hours. Each focus group was composed of six respondents except one focus group that consisted of seven respondents.

Relating to the research question, the focus groups and interviews are divided into three structured 'blocks'. First, the participants are asked about their voting behavior. This voting

behavior is used to identify their position on the political left-right spectrum. Second, the participants are asked about their opinions on three political topics. These topics are economic redistribution, immigration and the presence of Islam in the Netherlands. These political topics are used as an instrument to see how political internet memes affects the political attitudes and behavior of the students themselves. In other words, the emphasis is on how university students perceive political internet memes that are based on these topics, in relation to how their political attitudes and behavior.

Third, the participants discuss why they watch internet memes in order to understand the meaning they give to these internet memes. Lastly, the participants are shown political internet memes of the political topics mentioned above. Showing these memes makes it possible to observe the reactions of the participants. Possible reactions that the university students can give are agreement, feeling provoked, or trying to bring nuance into the message they see (Chagas et al., 2019). In order to receive different types of reactions, the political internet memes that are shown are of different sides of the political left-right spectrum. The participants were shown political internet memes of both left-wing politics as well as right-wing politics in order to gain a complete understanding of how these university students reacted to these internet memes. Because focus group 2 included multiple international students, different political internet memes were used in this focus group to prevent focusing on a Dutch political context in which international students cannot express their opinions on memes on these political topics. The memes that are shown to the participants are added in the appendix.

The recorded data was transcribed and coded using the coding software Nvivo. According to Bryman (2016), there are three steps in the coding process. The first step is open coding in which the data gets sorted in what literally is stated in the transcription. The second step is axial coding. This step of coding means that the open codes are interpreted, connections have been made and patterns have been found. Examples of patterns that have been found through axial coding are social validation, serendipity and polarization. Third, there is selective coding in which all the created and interpreted codes are connected to one another to answer the research question. This resulted in three groupings of codes. These groupings or general themes are functions of memes, socio-political consequences of memes and temporality.

Lastly, a member check has been performed. A number of participants have been asked to read the results of this master's thesis in order to check whether they can agree with the meanings that are described in this master's thesis. This member check gives the participants the opportunity to review the results of the research for accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012). Such

a member check helps remove incorrect data or incorrect interpretations of the data and increase the validity of this research (Boeije, 2014).

# Results

During the data analysis, it became clear that the data could be structured according to three major topics. The first major topic is the functions of internet memes. In this section, it will be explained why university students watch internet memes supported by ideas about relatability, comic relief and social validation. The second major topic is about the socio-political consequences that political internet memes have. Here, I will explain what kind of political memes there are and how they contribute to polarization. Also, I will briefly explain the role of serendipity, the chance of encountering something that someone did not expected at first. The last major topic is the temporality of internet memes. In the focus groups, it turned out that the context in which internet memes take place can get outdated at a fast rate. I will analyze this through Chandler's (2013) work about longevity and fecundity.

## Functions of internet memes

When asking why university students consume internet memes, all of them replied that they primarily consume internet memes for entertainment purposes. *"To have a good chuckle"*, and *"kill some time when you have nothing to do''* are the most prevalent reasons to come up on why university students consume internet memes.

### Relatability

One of the most important reasons why internet memes are considered funny, is their relatability. With relatability. I mean that when people look at memes, they reflect the context of the meme on themselves and their personal life experiences. In one of the focus groups, Vera stated: *''They are recognizable to a group you belong to. Such as, for example, final exam memes. It was just great fun that you are in the same boat.''* This example was also stated in another focus group by Laura, which shows how these memes are relatable to similar to their personal life experiences. Furthermore, politicians and political events are also made into memes which were applied to these very same personal life experiences. Evelien gave an example of Mark Rutte's speech about being *"past the start, but not at the end of the beginning attached to working on the thesis"*. This gave Evelien a sense of relatability as she was working on her own thesis at the time this meme showed up.

On the other hand, some memes were considered unrelatable and therefore not funny. The reason the meme was unrelatable to the university students was because of their implications of the creator of the meme. This was most notably visible with Meme 1 about Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte in which the top caption of the meme stated: "I am the Robin Hood of the

21st century" and the bottom caption stated: "I steal from the poor and give it to the rich" which criticized Mark Rutte's liberal policies. One of the first things Nora stated she thought of when reading the meme was "*a woman in their 40s or 50s with a short, spicy haircut who is frustrated with society and thinks it's funny to make a meme*" to which the rest laughed and agreed. In another focus group, Levi stated: *''It looks like it's made by a Gerda in her little school car because she wants to be politically engaged''* and like with the focus group in which Nora partook, this focus group laughed and agreed as well. The word that came back in multiple focus groups was *"boomer meme"* which implies that the target age-demographic of this meme is not the university students themselves but rather people of older generations. The relatability is not only connected to their political attitudes and behavior but also to whom they interpret as the creator of such political memes. Chagas et al. (2019) state that internet memes are made by amateurs, knowing their feelings and sensibilities. The university students did not experience that the creator of this meme knew their feelings and sensibilities. They found themselves distant from the creator of the meme.

**Comic relief**

In multiple focus groups, the consumption of political internet memes has also been used as a comic relief for contemporary political events. Through exposing politicians and events to the ridiculous, it serves as a way to cope with the idea that opposing political views have been implemented. One example was given by Levi who stated: *''One meme I like showed a dialogue between God and an Angel in which God asks: Are they scared enough, not yet. You got Trump running? Yep. Hurricanes? Yep. Ok, send in the clowns. That's at the time the clown shit happened where crazy people [dressed] as clowns stabbed people.[4] That summed up for me how broken America was.''*

This quote Levi gave about this meme he saw, served as a comic relief towards the political situations in the United States. By drawing the opposing political views into the absurd, the political internet memes relativize political situations that oppose the students' own political views.

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[4] This is a reference to the 2016 clown sightings that happened globally, but most notably in the United States.

**Social validation**

Exposing political actors to the ridiculous does not change the political points of view of the university students in these focus groups. However, their already entrenched political preferences can be reinforced when seeing political internet memes. An example of this was given by Hidde about meme 5: *"That Bernie Sanders meme makes you think, even though he gets ridiculed, he fights for something beautiful, and confirms what I think."* The Bernie Sanders meme is a picture of Bernie Sanders campaign in which he asks the public to help him with funding his presidential campaign saying: "I am once again asking for your financial support." With Bernie Sanders, those that support him, the meme reflects his attempts to get money from the common people rather than major corporations which only confirmed and strengthened their previous views they had about Bernie Sanders. Guadnago et al. (2013) state that people look internet memes to see whether their ideas match that of the collective group. In the example Hidde gave, the Bernie Sanders meme reinforced and confirmed his individual ideas about Bernie Sanders.

However, these individual ideas are also related to group validation. These individual ideas do not stop people from sharing internet memes with likeminded individuals. In all focus groups, it was stated that memes are also a form of community building because of how they spread on social media. *"They are recognizable to a group you belong to"* The university students experience this form of social validation by sharing memes with friends, families and acquaintances that can relate to the meme similar to their own views. It acknowledges the bonds people have with one another in a likeminded group (DeAtley, 2014). Sharing these memes also helps as Liam stated *"a way to keep in touch"* with these likeminded individuals. This is in line with what Burroughs (2013) states about how internet memes are used to facilitate conversation.

As Sălcudean & Motoroiu (2020) state, those that consume internet memes also have to understand the context in which the memes take place. University students are more likely to share memes to other people with whom they know understand this context. In the focus groups, they stated that they share internet memes only with those they know will understand the meme's joke. Therefore, there is an exclusivity in which one must understand the context in which the meme takes place.

Although Leiser (2019) stated that there is an exclusivity in the sense that one needs to understand the meme language in order to consume internet memes. This language also applies to the context in which a meme takes place. An example of that can be through inside jokes in which the consumer of the meme understands the context of the joke. As Dusan stated: *"I don't*

*really have a specific favorite meme. I see a lot of memes, but I think the one with inside jokes that you need to understand, those inside jokes are the cherry on top."*


**Socio-political consequences**

When asking about their political attitudes and behavior, that university students all stated that they have their political preferences and ideas clear and have in-depth knowledge on various political topics themselves. Therefore, political internet memes are less likely to affect their political attitudes and behavior. However, they state that it is not that political internet memes that affect their political attitudes and behavior but rather that their political attitudes and behavior affect which internet memes they consider funny.

These internet memes *"are there to ridicule those in power''.* That is what Aaron said when describing political internet memes. However, this does not only account for political actors in power, but also for various other political actors, such as electoral candidates, such as Bernie Sanders. By creating political internet memes, various political actors are exposed to the ridiculous.

There are two kinds of political internet memes. First, there are the internet memes that depict political actors without the intention of spreading a political message. An example of such a meme was given in the first focus group by Milan. He showed a picture of a cover of Time magazine with the text *"Prince Charles, the man who would be king"*. Underneath that cover was a picture of queen Elizabeth with the text *"laughs in immortality''.* When asking him what he thought of this meme he replied, *"I think it's funny"*. As was stated in this focus group, this meme was not meant to open up a discussion but rather create jokes at the expense of these political actors.

Second there are political internet memes that aim to spread a political message through their satirical nature. On the one hand, these messages are open for discussion, on the other hand these messages are not open for discussion at all. An example of an internet meme that that students found to be open and closed for discussion at the same time, is meme 4. This meme is a wooden trojan horse in which the front of the gate states the words; *"the Dutch"*. On the horse itself it says*, "Temporary migrant workers"* while the inside of the horse states *"Turkish and Moroccan immigrants".* Dusan gave a clear example of why this meme is not open for discussion. He saw the meme and said: *''It's no secret they came here to work and then settled here. So yes, they came here. And then?''* For him it felt like there was no argument or point made, only something told which was already known.

On the other hand, in a different focus group, this same meme was considered a proper example for a discussion among students in another focus group. Not because of the contents of the meme itself, but rather its background. It was considered a good example of why someone would create this meme and *"why people see these labor migrants as a threat".*

Although internet memes can be used to open a discussion, internet memes can also be used to silence a discussion. In the first focus group, Milan gave the "OK Boomer" meme as an example of a meme that can silence a political discussion and the other participants agreed. The "Ok Boomer" meme is a meme in which young people experience that their voices and arguments are considered irrelevant by the older Baby Boomer generation (Lianos, 2020). In discussions between young people and baby boomers, tensions may arise for young people. They experience that their concerns are not being heard by baby boomers during a discussion (Lim & Kimanski, 2020). In such cases, young people use the phrase "OK Boomer" to end the discussion.

**Polarization**

Political internet memes are not only used to confirm political points of view but also provoke people who oppose the political messages that memes can state. In one of the focus groups, Giselle described that memes could trigger someone into provocation. *"It is mainly a trigger if I agree or not. If I see a meme like that of Geert Wilders, I don't support that."*

In a focus group, Vera stated *"You really want to agree with a meme."* However, when an individual does not agree with a meme, they experience frustration. Darian confirmed this by stating the following: *''Yeah if you disagree with the meme, it's really super frustrating. When I see an alt -right meme I think "how stupid are you? Act normal."* This quote shows how he experiences frustration when a political meme is shown that opposes these political views. Other university students showed similar reactions of frustration when shown different memes.

An example of frustration was when showing meme 2 about right-wing politician Geert Wilders. This meme depicted the face of right-wing politician Geert Wilders pasted on a movie poster. The movie his face was pated on was 'Saving Private Ryan'. The captions of this meme were depicted in the form of a movie title as well which stated: "Geert Wilders, Saving Private Holland: The mission is the[5] stop Islamification''. When I showed the meme to the focus group, Hidde's reaction was: *"I can already imagine that if this meme comes on Facebook, I see the comment sections underneath, laughing lots. and then it gets a lot of likes, and people who*

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[5] This meme actually contains this grammar error.

*agree, fun and games. But when I see this meme in front of me, I think this is so retarded. And: I think this meme polarizes more. I can already imagine those comment sections of people who agree. I always try to understand these people but when I see how ill-advised they are. When I see this meme, I want nothing to do with this line of thought."*

Therefore, political internet memes can also be seen as tool for polarization, On the one hand, these memes can reinforce the political ideas of a group opposing it, on the other hand, people can disagree and perceive frustration, therefore being reinforced in opposing these lines of thought that the meme exhibits. As Milan states: *"you agree with the meme or disagree and that can be frustrating. That is an example of polarization in itself."*


**Serendipity**

Internet memes make certain topics and ideas visible in an accessible way. During the focus groups, it was shown that internet memes provide serendipity. Serendipity is about encountering something that one did not expect or sought after (Agarwal, 2015). For example, Ibrahim states that he knows the minidocumentary series; Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness, through internet memes. In another focus group, Leroy stated that the first time he heard from narcos syndicates was through internet memes, which shows how internet memes can expose various different actors to a wider audience.

This form of serendipity is also seen when it comes to consuming memes that are politically themed. The same accounts for political internet memes as Jonas stated: *It is also a lot of community building. Frequently using 4chan, 4chan developed a lot of memes that become endemic that are very much known outside. That memes become known outside the bubble.*

These internet memes provide serendipity and make different actors more visible to a wider audience. This is also possible on a political level, as Jonas also stated: *"I noticed that these niche ideologies became a meme at some point like national bolshevism. There were a certain group of people that heard from it through these memes and thought "That's quite nice", so they stayed with it.''* This example shows that although political internet memes did not specifically affect the political attitudes and behaviors of university students, internet memes do provide serendipity in the sense that people are exposed to ideologies that are similar to their own norms and values. Therefore, they are more likely to sympathize with these political ideologies that they at first, did not expect to encounter.

**Temporality**

An important part of the consumption of political internet memes is the moment in which the memes are consumed and spread. When showing meme 1 about how Mark Rutte is the "21$^{st}$ century Robin hood that takes from the poor and gives to the rich*". About this meme, Matijs stated: "*If this meme came out after the dividend tax[6], I might have thought it was funny. Now it is without context. I wouldn't share it.*"

If this meme was shared at a time Mark Rutte was criticized for his economic policies, then the meme would have been considered funny. However, during the moment the focus groups were held, Mark Rutte received praise for his handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Netherlands and his popularity increased. Therefore, this meme about Mark Rutte ''stealing money from the poor'' was considered out of place by the university students. The moment this meme was presented shows that the moment in which a political internet meme is shown matters on how such a meme is received.

Another meme that showed the importance of temporality of political internet memes is Meme 3. What happened in this meme was that Prime Minister Mark Rutte decreed that people were no longer allowed to shake hands with each other as a measure against the COVID-19 outbreak. He stands next to Jaap van Dissel who is the head of the Dutch The National Institute for Public Health and the Environment[7]. Immediately after Mark Rutte decreed that hand shaking was no longer allowed, he accidentally shook hands with Jaap van Dissel. The handshaking is a contradiction of what he had decreed. In the image of the meme shown to the focus group are two contradictions. The captions on the picture shown to the focus group state the following: The upper caption states "1000 euro for every Dutch citizen". The lower caption states "Tax reduction for companies". The upper caption of the meme references an electoral promise Mark Rutte made in the 2012 parliamentary elections. He promised 1000 euro for every Dutch citizen through tax reduction. Meanwhile, the lower caption criticizes his policies of lowering taxes for companies.

There were two aspects of temporality perceived in this meme. First there is the time in which the political events happened that are depicted in the meme. That is the political promise of Mark Rutte during the 2012 elections. Many of the university students are in their early 20s and the context of the "1000 euros for every Dutch citizen'' had to be explained to them. Due

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[6] After the third cabinet (Rutte-III) was formed in 2017, the Dutch government had plans to abolish the dividend tax. This was controversial because, no political party in the coalition had this plan in their electoral program. In the end, this plan was scrapped.
[7] In Dutch, it is the: Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu (RIVM)

to needing explanation, the meme was not received well among some of the participants. This shows a political internet meme has to be understood immediately in order to be received well. Furthermore, the raising of issues from 2012 were no longer relevant for the university students. This is highlighted by how Aaron stated: *"This is from 2012. Nobody talks about that anymore. Get over it''*. This goes in line with Bryan & Knight (2019) who state that messages such as memes must stay relevant through matching them with contemporary worldviews. If nobody talks about it anymore, the topic is no longer a contemporary issue. In such scenario's political internet memes such as meme 3 lose their relevancy and their influence over people.

Second, the template of the meme itself was only a month old at the time of the focus groups, but the university students already considered the meme outdated. In one focus group, Evelien stated: *"Hand shaking, long time* ago''*, when seeing this meme. In another focus group, Bas stated *"If you would have shown me this meme 30 minutes after this press conference, then I would have laughed. Now it's just meh''*. The others in the focus groups agreed, and stated they find the format outdated despite being only a month old prior to the focus group. The students mentioned that *"a lot can be done with the template"* due to the contradictories it can show. This can be considered a high fecundity as Chandler (2013) would state, due to the meme's potential of spreading wide. However, the longevity of the meme was considered very short by the university students.

Although Chandler (2013) does not specifically talk about whether fecundity or longevity is more important with memes in general. Yet, within the context of this meme, it seems longevity has more emphasis than fecundity. The meme itself is considered to have a high fecundity due it being applicable to many different contexts, but it has a very short longevity. A month after Mark Rutte shook hands with Jaap van Dissel, the memes was considered *"meh"*, showing the short lifespans political internet memes can have.

On the other hand, the students also found that some memes are not bound to a specific moment or timeframe. Meme 2, the Geert Wilders meme was considered such a meme. In a focus group, Rosa stated: *"The meme of Geert Wilders meme is more timeless than the other memes''* to which Bas replied: *"That makes it less funny"*. The others in the focus group agreed with the statements from Bas and Rosa. This meme has a strong longevity, namely as long as Geert Wilders is still a politician. Although Chandler (2013) states that a long lifespan of an internet meme is a perquisite for a meme to survive, the long timespan of the meme makes the meme less funny in the eyes of the university students.

# Discussion

Various political and non-political actors spread political internet memes on social media sources to gain the attention of young people. Quantitative research in the form of (Kulkarni, 2017), organized polls (Malhotra, 2019) and experimental research (Klein, 2019) showed that the relationship between internet memes and political attitudes and behavior are not significant. Yet, the various actors mentioned above continue to use internet memes to appeal to this younger audience, showing that this relationship is still relevant.

In order to understand this relationship, this research deviated from quantitative methods used by previous authors and used qualitative research methods instead. Specifically, focus groups have been done in order to collect research data. The young participants were university students in the Netherlands with diverse political views. At first, I aimed to collect my data through physical focus groups. However, the COVID-19 outbreak rendered physical meetings impossible and therefore, these focus groups were held through Skype.

The primary reason why university students consume internet memes is for entertainment. When internet memes are relatable to the everyday life of these university students, they are considered funny. On the other hand, the university students also associate an internet meme with its creator, which also causes an internet meme to be potentially unrelatable to the university students. While in the literature, it was stated that internet memes are created by people who know the feelings of the masses (Chagas et al., 2019), the university students did not experience this. Terms like *"boomer meme"* show a generational distance between baby boomers and young people and implications of a generational gap between the creator of political internet memes and the university students. Therefore, there is a possibility of a mismatch between internet meme creators and consumers. This shows there is no 'universal meme consumer' and that memes are dependent on how relatable the creator and the internet meme are to its target group.

According to Van der Meer & Hakhverdian (2016), higher educated people are more likely to have acquired the necessary skills to judge political institutions on performance and processes instead of general media messages. The same accounts for the participants of this research. These higher educated university students stated that they have an in-depth knowledge on various political topics and that their political attitudes and behavior determine which internet memes they consider funny rather than the other way around.

As Guadagno et al. (2013) have stated, Internet memes are a source of social validation. By consuming political internet memes, the political ideals of university students are reinforced.

At the same time, internet memes are similar to political cartoons in the way that they can provoke people (Dougherty, 2002). Similar to political cartoons, internet memes that present ideas that oppose the political norms and values of university students, can provoke them in a way that it causes frustration. In that sense, there is either agreement and reinforcement of ideas, or frustration and provocation, which shows how internet memes can cause polarization between people of various political views. Based on the way the message is spread, internet memes can also keep people politically engaged by encouraging discussions. On the other hand, memes like the "OK Boomer" meme show that internet memes can also silence a discussion.

One aspect of consuming internet memes that was not mentioned in previous literature about internet memes is serendipity, the chance to stumble upon the unexpected. Participants in the focus groups stated how they came across various ideas and groups through the memes they saw about certain topics. From simple entertainment such as Tiger king, to narcos syndicates and political ideologies are experienced as something they learned and got to know through internet memes themselves.

The last aspect that is prevalent is the temporality of internet memes. Internet memes in this research are shown to get outdate rather quickly. In the case of one particular meme, it was considered outdated in less than a month from when the context of the meme took place. Both Chandler (2013) and Dawkins (1976) mention the longevity of the meme. However, these do not explicitly state an explicit lifespan of a meme, which is impossible as that differs for every internet meme. Chandler (2013) found two years quite an achievement. Likewise, the participants stated that they find a meme which was just one month old at the time of the research outdated, while there were memes they considered *"timeless"*.

The results of this research showed that the lifespan of an internet meme is in most cases short. In order for a meme to be considered funny, they have to be shown soon after they have been 'created'. When it comes to political internet memes or internet memes in general, contemporality is important. This is in line with Bryant & Knight (2019), who state that media messages must stay relevant by matching contemporary worldviews. The same accounts for internet memes. If a meme shows moments that happened years ago, requires time to understand, or is considered outdated, the meme is considered as *"not funny"*. Meme 3 was a meme whose template was considered outdated, even though its image happened a month prior to this research. The explanations for when exactly an internet meme is considered outdated could not be explained and is a limitation that requires future research.

Another limitation of this research was the use of Skype due to the COVID-19 outbreak. There are different advantages and disadvantages to using Skype over physical interviews. On

the one hand, the way of interaction between people is different on Skype than it is with physical focus groups. Also, the technical issues of crashing, lagging and too soft tones are something to take into consideration. Because of these technical problems, the focus groups took more time than necessary. On the other hand, using Skype enables the participants to partake in the focus groups without wasting time and resources on traveling to specific areas. The participants are able to partake from the comfort of their own homes. It was more accessible to for people of different places in the country to gather digitally and interact with one another.

Furthermore, this research aimed to observe the meaning that young people give to political internet memes, this research was limited to university students. Even though this research has had participants sympathizing various political parties from the political left-right spectrum, for future research, I recommend looking at lower-educated students or working young people as well. It is highly likely that they give different meanings to internet memes, which could be affected by educational level (Klein, 2019). Also, it is interesting to observe whether young people who are not university students share similar attitudes in having clear political preferences like university students. Similar to this research, focus groups can capture the interaction between these difference groups of people as well.

Another limitation of this research is that it only captured the perspectives of the internet meme 'consumers'. The creators of these political internet memes were not heard, and their possible reasons and motivations were speculated by the participants. For future research, it is recommended to approach such creators. Examples of internet meme creators that considered socially relevant are political parties that create and spread internet memes. Internet memes portray these political parties and their politician positively (Dean, 2019). Likewise, non-political actors that spread political internet memes on social media can also be valuable to research. Possible motivations for spreading internet memes are bringing attention to contemporary issues (Chagas et al., 2019), positive or negative portrayal of a politician (Dean, 2019) or propaganda for sensationalist statements (Leiser, 2019). Through semi-structured interviews, it is possible to speak to these actors about their motivations of creating political internet memes and spreading them on social media and the messages these internet memes carry. The combination of the perspectives of creators and consumers contributes to a complete view of the relationship between internet memes and political attitudes and behavior.

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# Appendix

**Memes shown in focus group 1, 3 and 4:**

**Meme 1**



Mark Rutte the Robin Hood. Retrieved from: Klein (2019).

**Meme 2**



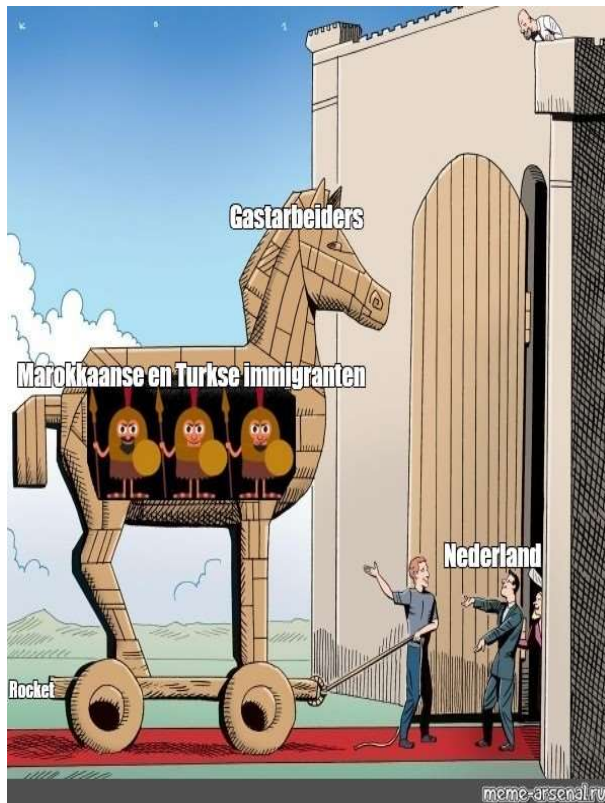Geert Wilders Saving Private Holland. Retrieved from: Klein (2019)

**Meme 3**



Mark Rutte shaking hands. Retrieved March 12, 2020, from: https://www.facebook.com/MemesvoordeMassas/photos/a.1645715668830883/2810308539038251/?type=3&theater

**Meme 4**



Trojan Horse Meme. Retrieved March 12, 2020, from:
https://www.meme-
arsenal.com/memes/39ad1a68d334da8fa075107274cff
cf4.jpg

**Memes shown in focus group 2:**

**Meme 5**



Bernie Sanders Meme. Retrieved April 20, 2020, from: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-am-once-again-asking-for-your-financial-support

**Meme 6**



Europe in 2030

UK Islamic Republic. Retrieved April 20, 2020, from: https://pics.me.me/yes-it-was-the-british-do-you-know-what-this-2432713.png

**Meme 7**



Syrian Refugees. Retrieved April 20, 2020, from: https://media.makeameme.org/created/the-syrian-refugees-dfiymt.jpg

**Meme 8**



DNC Presidential Candidate. Retrieved April 20, 2020, from: https://img-9gag-fun.9cache.com/photo/a0Rm72O_700bwp.webp

# Checklist Ethical and Privacy Aspects of Research

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

**PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION**

Project title: Politics of Internet Memes: How Dutch University Students Give Meaning to Political Internet Memes

Name, email of student: Yasser Forotan, 550719mf@student.eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Gijs Custers, custers@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 09-04-2020

Is the research study conducted within DPAS                                    YES

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?

(e.g. internship organization)

**PART II: TYPE OF RESEARCH STUDY**

Please indicate the type of research study by circling the appropriate answer:

1.      Research involving human participants.    YES

        If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research?          NO

        *Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).*

2.      Field observations without manipulations that will not involve

        identification of participants.                                        YES

3.      Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary
        data that has been anonymized by someone else).                        NO

**PART III: PARTICIPANTS**

**(Complete this section only if your study involves human participants)**

Where will you collect your data?

*The data is gathered through Skype.*

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the size of your sample?

*The sample size is 25 participants divided over 4 focus groups.*

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

*The population I aim to research are university students that do either a bachelor or a master programme at a Dutch university. However, the students must have affiliation with and knowledge about internet memes, so the population of university students that consume internet memes is unknown.*

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

1.  Will information about the nature of the study and about what
    participants can expect during the study be withheld from them?       NO

2.  Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written
    'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study?   NO

3.  Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation
    at any time be withheld from participants?                            NO

4.  Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants?            NO
    *Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).*

5.  Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or
    negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by
    participants?                                          `            NO

6.  Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)?                                    YES

7.  Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent?                    NO

8.  Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study?    NO

9.  Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured?    NO

10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study?    NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

*Doing Politics & Society, the theme of political preferences and opinions is pretty much unavoidable. The focus of my thesis is how political internet memes affect political attitudes and behaviour, so therefore, within the context of the master programme and the topic at hand, it is unavoidable.*

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Anonymizing the participants, keeping them in a focus group and being open and transparent.

*Keeping them in focus groups, and referring to the groups as group 1, group 2 etc. The participants will be anonymized and given pseudonyms, and I will be transparent to the participants of what the research entails and what happens to the data I have acquired.*

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

*No*

*Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.*

**Part IV: Data storage and backup**

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

*Then focus groups will be recorded on my phone through Skype's recording function Then, it will be stored on a safe e-mail account before transcribing it. A Dropbox account is also used.*

*Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.*

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

*The researcher (which means me).*

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

*It depends on its processing. Each time, I process the data, I will save it on my e-mail or dropbox account.*

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

*When it comes to focus groups, they will be referred to as group one, group two etc. All participants are given pseudonyms.*

*Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.*

**PART VI: SIGNATURE**

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.
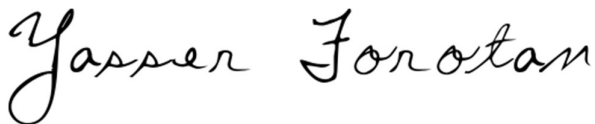
Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Yasser Forotan

Date: 20-03-2020

Signature:

*Yasser Forotan*

Name (EUR) supervisor: Gijs Custers

Date: 20-03-2020

Signature: