# **ETHNOGRAPHY OF MEMEING**:

The Efficacy of Using Internet Memes to Communicate Political Messages

By: Amanda Vodicka

## INTRODUCTION

Many people who use the internet are familiar with internet memes and can likely visualize one. Envisioning an internet meme may also cause someone to chuckle to themselves. Even if an individual does not actively seek out or share internet memes, these sometimes comical images, videos and posts are ubiquitous. Internet memes are units of culture created and shared digitally (Shifman 2014). In 2017, the Digital Future Report concluded that Americans spend nearly 11 hours every day interacting with or watching content on the screen of a computer, phone, TV or gaming console (Cole 2017). It is no longer a question of if Americans or how much use the internet, but instead it is a question of how its usage affects their daily lives and communication styles.

Due to the pervasiveness of internet memes their content, virality and impact on culture have been researched from sociological, media studies and anthropological perspectives. Understanding how individuals interpret internet memes as linguistic symbols from an anthropological perspective reveals that internet memes are more than online jokes. Internet memes are snapshots of contemporary pop and political culture used to share political messages and commentary within digital communities and in real life (Davis et al. 2016, Mondoza-Denton 2017 and Chow 2019). Internet meme's democratic power, amateur participation and the ability to effectively discuss ideas through comedic images gives them great political potential (Carter 2013, Westfall 2018 and Bebic and Volrevic 2018). Political and applied anthropologists have studied how cultural groups and social movements use humorous internet memes to communicate collective ideologies (Westfall 2018 and Haynes 2019). However, there is a lack of research that seeks to understand how individuals interpret messages from internet memes. Shedding light on the emic, or insider, perspective of meme interpretation can broaden

anthropology's understanding of how internet memes are used to communicate. Using the photo elicitation method, 127 undergraduate students at Fort Lewis College in Durango, CO were asked to describe and interpret internet memes used by activists in support of the Global Climate Strike, the environmental social movement comprised of youth around the world. The responses were analyzed to form an emergent thesis about the efficacy of using internet memes to communicate political messages. Content analysis of the participants' responses to Global Climate Strike memes determined that humor, familiarity and age are three factors that influence how people interpret political memes. Researching the symbolic usage of internet memes is crucial to better understanding them as a form of communication in both online communities and the real world.

## BACKGROUND

The term "meme" originates from *The Selfish Gene* written by Richard Dawkins in 1976. Memes are small units of culture such as an idea, skill or practice that are transmitted from person to person through imitation, also known as copying (Dawkins 1976). Memetics is the study of cultural transmission which equates the spread and evolution of cultural practices to that of genes and Darwinian evolutionary theory (Dawkins 1976 and Blackmore 2000). Cultural practices such as handwashing, fashion trends and artistic styles are each an example of a meme (Modzelewski 2013). Students of memetics analyze and describe memes by their fidelity (accuracy of a meme as it spreads), fecundity (the ability of a meme to spread easily and quickly), and longevity (the length of time a meme lasts or remains relevant) (Davis et al. 2016). A meme persists in a culture if it has high fecundity and fidelity, whereas a meme that is difficult

for others to share and understand is less likely to be transmitted within or between cultures (Blackmore 2000). Through those methods a meme, such as the way we greet each other, transfers from person to person and evolves over time.

In the past, memes were shared and adapted through customs and folklore, but the invention of the internet allowed memes to be rapidly shared and adapted in online communities through digital photos, videos and text (McNeill 2017 and Blackmore 2000). Individuals can easily share and discuss emotions, events and ideologies with anyone in the world without face-to-face interaction through the internet. Virtual togetherness describes how internet users create imagined communities (Anderson 1983) with each other through communication within online forums, Facebook groups and other participatory websites, referred to as online communities (Modzelewski 2013). Even though people who interact through digital channels may never meet face-to-face they share a sense of identity based on their perceived membership to the online group (Modzelewski 2013). Units of culture that are created and shared digitally within online communities are referred to as internet memes (Shifman 2014). The practice of viewing and creating internet memes has become a cultural practice for communicating self-expression, commentary and other ideas online and in real life (Westfall 2018). When an internet meme is rapidly viewed and spread by a large group of people (referred to as going viral) it inspires new dialogue and content creation within online communities (McNeill 2017 and Shifman 2013). Popular internet memes include humorous images of anthropomorphic cartoon characters, cute animals (see figure 1) and pop culture references.

Internet memes are powerful forms of communication because they follow simple formats that can be easily changed to match the message of an individual or organization. Meme creators often utilize sarcasm and humorous imagery to discuss subjects, emotions and events

that are serious or stressful in a lighthearted or even satirical way (Bebic and Volarevic 2018,


Figure 1. LOLcats meme (Westfall 2018)

Shifman 2013, Davis et al 2016). There are a growing number of anthropologists researching how social movements and cultural groups organize in online communities and communicate shared ideologies through internet memes (Carter 2013, Modzelewski 2013, Davis et al. 2016, Westfall 2018 and Haynes 2019). One of their findings was that reframing of political ideas into a humorous context makes the content more digestible and builds audience engagement (Haynes 2019). An example of this is "World War III" memes. In the beginning of 2020 individuals younger than 30 in the United States were concerned that the U.S.'s fatal airstrike in Iran would cause the start of World War III. On the internet, individuals created memes joking about avoiding the military draft and comparing violent video games to a real battle scenario (see figure 2).

The possibility of being drafted and watching friends die is scary but reframing those scenarios in a humorous context allowed individuals across the country to discuss their anti-war ideologies. While the World War III memes may be interpreted at first glance as naive and immature, they allowed individuals to cope with the situation by expressing their shared anxiety and feelings of helplessness (Roberts 2020). Marginalized groups around the world utilize social

media and internet memes to express their ideologies by creating and sharing internet memes

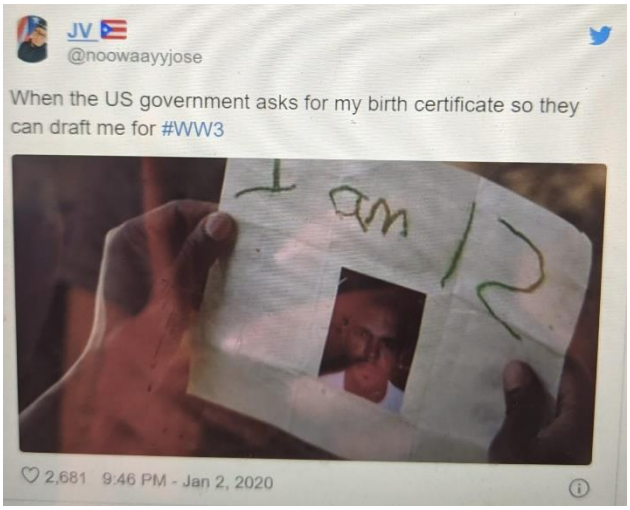


Figure 2. WW3 meme @noowaayyjose posted on Twitter (Roberts 2020)

with their online communities (Haynes 2019). Nell Haynes' research of Chilean meme humor revealed that Chileans create and share humorous memes that support the group's real-life anti-immigrant sentiments (Haynes 2019). Her study strengthens the idea that internet memes use humor to express shared political ideas both in online communities and in the real world. By using internet memes as symbols to communicate collective ideologies, members of online communities are creating a new form of communication.

Grassroots movements, like how marginalized groups gather on social media, utilize internet memes to connect to the public (see figure 3). Activists create internet memes relevant to their movement to efficiently rally supporters, gain publicity and share information about their cause in a cost-effective manner (Davis et al. 2016, Lenhardt 2016 and Bebic and Volarevic 2018). Content analysis of web page forums, such as 4chan, and online communities, such as Facebook groups, found that memes created and shared by group members influenced political narratives and participation in the real world (Mazambani et al. 2015, Davis et al. 2016,

Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017, Bebic and Volarevic 2018 and Silvestri 2018). Organizers for Free Peltier Now, the movement seeking clemency for Native American activist Leonard Peltier, reported an increase of participants and donations due to the popularity of their Facebook group's memes (Lenhardt 2016).

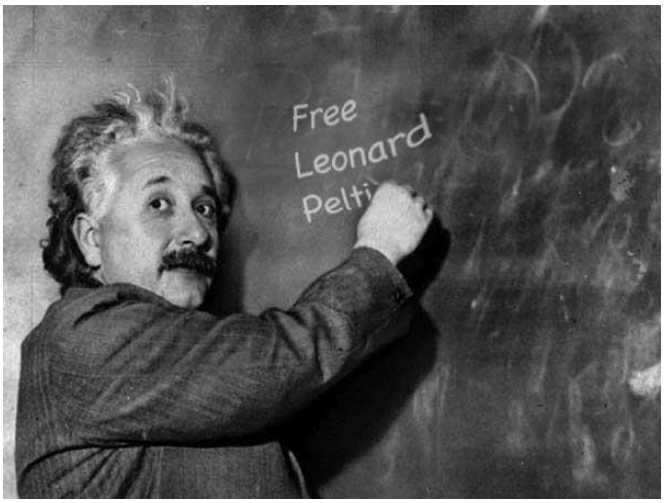


Figure 3. "Free Leonard Peltier" adaptation of the "Einstein Blackboard" meme by Reamus Wilson, first posted July 7, 2012 on Leonard Peltier's Support Group Facebook page (Lenhardt 2016)

Greenpeace's "Let's Go!" Campaign is another pertinent example of internet memes successfully increasing public support for a social movement. In 2013, the Shell Corporation announced plans to explore the Arctic's natural resources. In protest to this news, the environmental group Greenpeace launched a website that provided users with environmental information and templates to create, remix and share satirical pro-Shell Corporation advertisements. User generated internet memes (see figure 4) demonstrated how corporations and consumers sacrifice the environment for economic benefit. The powerful imagery, such as the photo of an arctic fox in a scenic landscape shown in Figure 4, caused viewers to think about the wildlife that would be harmed and other negative impacts of the Shell Corporation's proposed developments. The "advertisements" went viral online and caused public outrage against the Shell Corporation, and the negative publicity caused the company to terminate their

oil exploration mission in the Arctic (Davis et al. 2016). These seemingly humorous and highly relatable images wield surprising influence over people's thoughts on pop culture and political events.


Figure 4. A user-generated meme (Davis et al. 2016).

Today, the Global Climate Strike is a new social and environmental movement gaining international support, influencing state policy and creating memes. In September 2019, over four million people around the world walked out of school and work to gather outside of government buildings to protest climate change, government inaction, and the fossil fuel industry (Barclay and Resnick 2019). Members from hundreds of international groups and unions from each continent have joined the Global Climate Strike's online community where members organize events, voice their frustrations and ideas and share open-source protest art (Global Climate Strike). I noticed that some of the protest signs from the September walkouts reframed viral internet memes to communicate various environmental messages (see figures 5-10). One sign, (figure 10) used the "This is Fine" meme as a symbol to express the government's climate inaction. I recognized the images because "Shocked Pikachu", "Mocking Spongebob" and "This is Fine" are memes that symbolize specific messages within online communities. KnowYourMeme is a website whose users document the origin and meaning of internet memes.

According to the site, “Shocked Pikachu” is a surprised reaction to a predictable outcome, “Mocking Spongebob” is used to indicate a mocking tone and “This is Fine” is two panels from K.C. Green's Gunshow comic #648 in which a dog character says it is fine despite burning to the ground (KnowYourMeme 2020). It was the first time I had seen internet memes used on protest signs. I wondered how individuals would react to the repurposed internet memes and if they could interpret environmental messages that align with the Global Climate Strike movement.

Anthropologists, such as Nell Haynes, have established that internet memes are used to convey shared ideologies within social movements. However, there is a lack of research about how individuals interpret political internet memes. To better understand internet memes as symbols it is essential to understand how they are interpreted at the individual level as well. This study conducted content analysis of participants’ interpretations of Global Climate Strike memes as a case study to establish a grounded theory about the efficacy of using internet memes as linguistic symbols to convey political messages.

## METHODS

With Fort Lewis College Institutional Review Board approval (IRB-2019-203), this research used the photo elicitation method to survey participants’ knowledge and interpretation of internet memes in order to guide the emerging thesis. Photo elicitation is an ethnographic research method in which participants are shown visual images to elicit comments (Pink 2013). For this study, the researcher provided three images of protest signs containing viral internet memes (see figures 6, 8 and 10) as the photo prompts. The six-question Internet Meme Survey (see Appendix I) included both multiple choice and short answer questions and was completed

during class.

With the professor's prior permission, I visited eight classrooms and administered the implied consent protocol to 127 undergraduate students who were not familiar with the project. The implied consent statement and three images for the photo elicitation exercise (figures 6, 8 and 10) were projected via a PowerPoint presentation. In accordance with Internal Review Board regulations, participants were required to be legal adults (18+) in order to give implied consent. In order to protect participants' identities and maintain anonymity they and were asked to select their age range in lieu of disclosing their exact age or other identifying demographic information. Multiple choice questions were used to gauge participants' self-reported average daily internet usage and internet meme viewing habits to gain understanding about their familiarity with internet memes and online communities. The final three survey questions were short answer questions in three parts which asked the participants to name the internet meme and discuss their interpretation of the sign's message. Survey responses were recorded in an excel spreadsheet and the content was analyzed to determine themes about the symbolic usage and interpretation of internet memes.

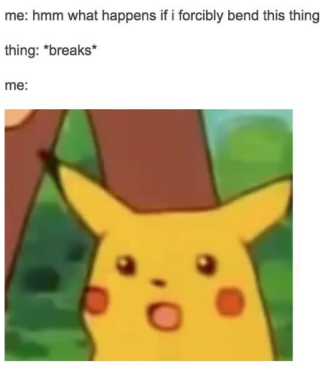


Figure 5. The first posts to use the "Shocked Pikachu" image as a reaction appeared on Tumblr September 2018 (KnowYourMeme 2020).


Figure 6. "Meme A:" protest sign from Global Climate Strike with the "Shocked Pikachu" meme posted to Instagram September 2019


Figure 7. @OGBEARD created the "Mocking Spongebob" meme in 2017 by posting a screenshot from an episode of the “Spongebob Squarepants” cartoon. To Twitter. (KnowYourMeme 2020).


Figure 8. “Meme B:” Protest sign from Global Climate Strike using the “Mocking Spongebob” meme posted to Instagram September 2019.


Figure 9. On January 10th, 2014, Redditor theonefoster submitted these two comic panels to /r/funny[27] with the title "Accurate representation of me dealing with university stress" (KnowYourMeme 2020).


Figure 10. “Meme C:” Protest sign from Global Climate Strike with the "This Is Fine" meme posted to Instagram September 2019.

## RESULTS

Out of the 127 participants 114 were between the ages of 18-24, six were 25-29 years old, three were 30-34 years old, three were ages 35-39, and one participant was 40+ years old. The data for the other two multiple choice questions were analyzed by creating figures that grouped participants based on their age. Overall, a majority of survey participants spend a range of 3-5 hours per day online (see figure 11). Participants younger than 30 were more likely to report

spending more than 6 hours online compared to older participants, and of the 127 participants only seven participants between the ages of 18-24 spend an average of 10+ hours a day online. Only three participants reported spending less than one hour online per day.

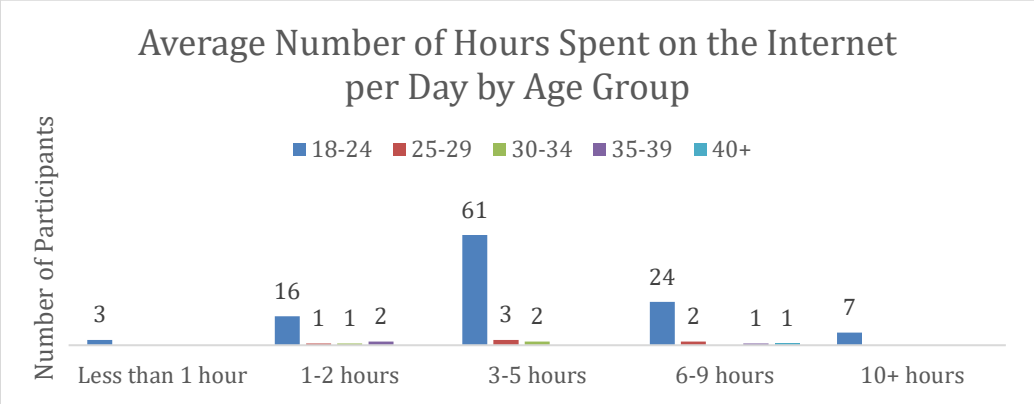


Figure 11. Average number of hours spent on the internet per day by age group.

Overall, younger participants viewed more memes per day than their older participants (see figure 12). Nearly half of 18-24 year old participants view 30+ plus memes per day, whereas only two participants older than 24 reported viewing more than 30 memes on an average day. The one 40+ year old participant looked at an average of 1-9 memes per day. Future research should consider seeking out a more equal ratio of participants across age groups to determine average internet usage and meme familiarity for individuals over 30 years old.

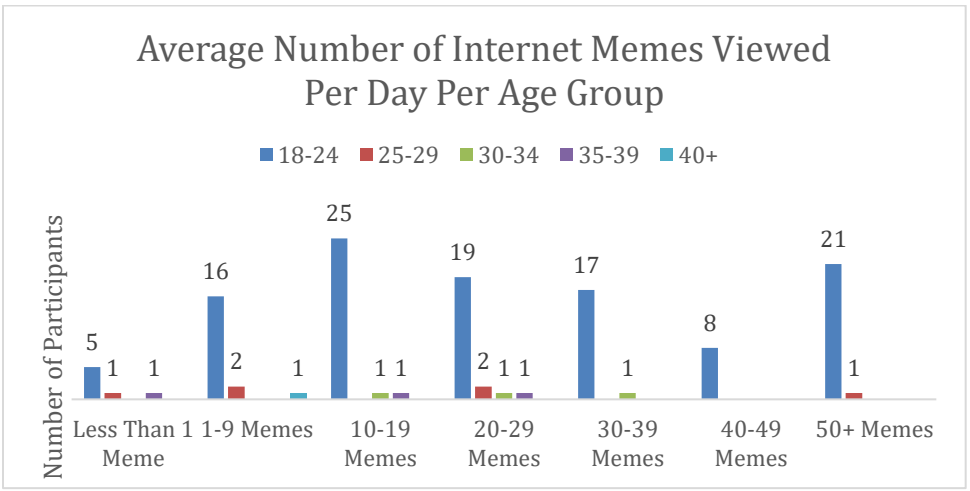


Figure 12. Average number of internet memes viewed per day by age group

The most recognized meme across all age groups was Meme B, “Mocking Spongebob,” with 106 out of the 127 participants reporting they knew the meme (see figure 13). The second meme participants recognized most, 93 out of 127, was Meme A, “Shocked Pikachu,” and Meme C, “This is Fine,” was the least recognized meme with only 79 participants reporting they knew the meme. The 40+ year old participant did not recognize any of the memes from the signs.

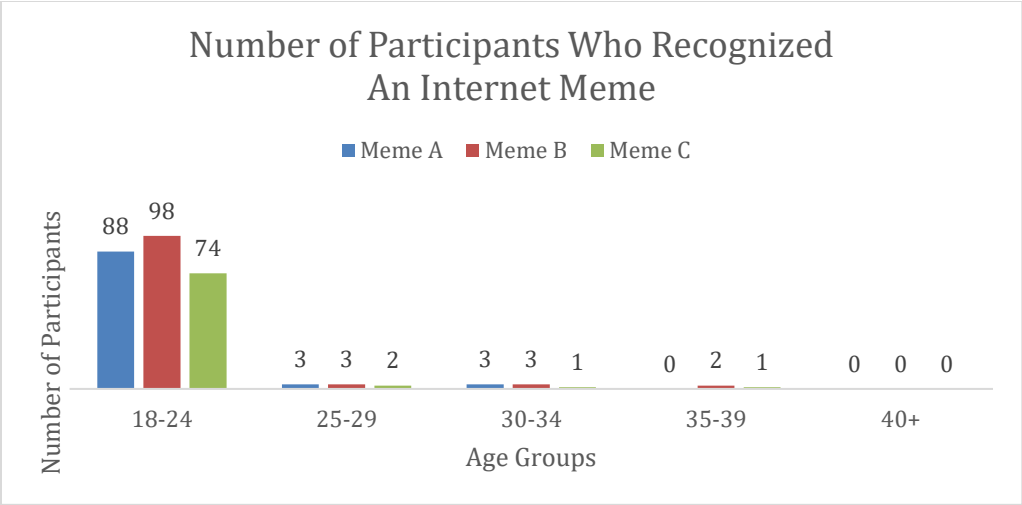


Figure 13. Number of participants who recognized an internet meme grouped by age.

There were a significant number of participants who did not recognize one of the memes, but still interpreted an environmental message from the sign. Older respondents were more likely than younger participants to interpret the activist’s message without knowing the meme. Of the three images, Meme C had the highest number of respondents who interpreted the political message of the sign despite not recognizing the meme. Participants successfully interpreted Memes A and B less than Meme C, but overall, there were more respondents who understood the signs’ messages than those who did not.

The participants’ written survey responses were analyzed to deduce what influenced their interpretations. Humor, familiarity with climate change, and age were determined to be important themes participants discussed most often in their interpretations.

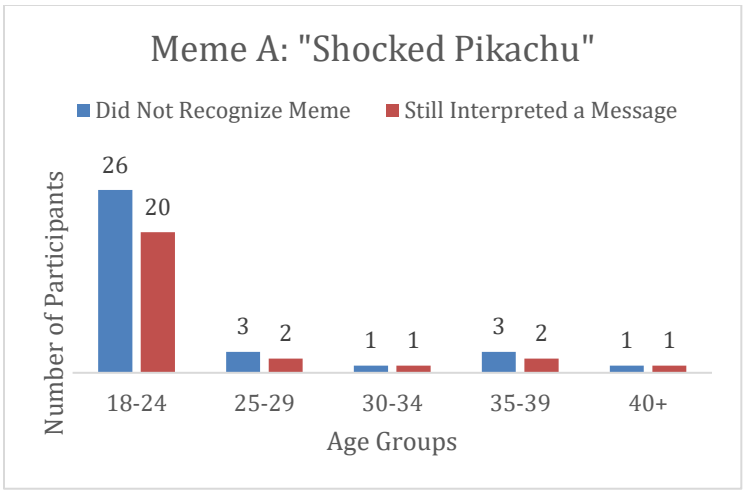


Figure 14. Participants who did not recognize Meme A that still interpreted a message by age group.

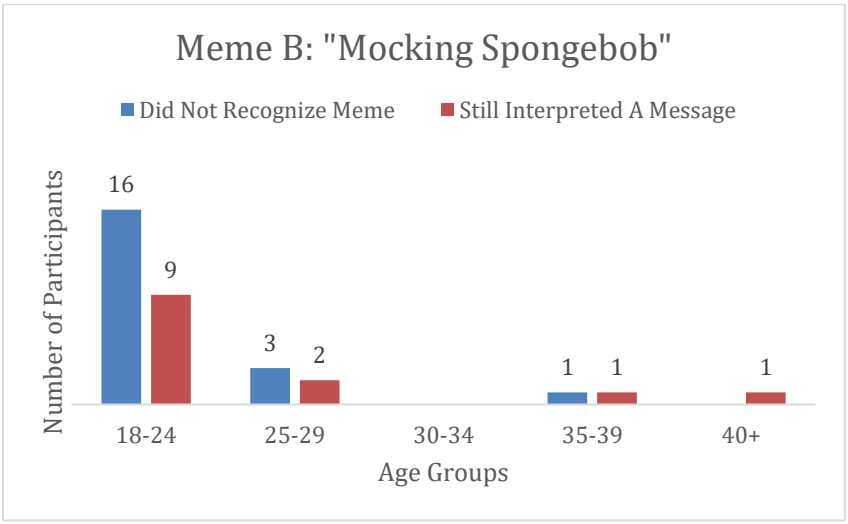


Figure 15. Participants who did not recognize Meme B that still interpreted a message by age group. (Each participant in the 30-34 age group recognized Meme B).

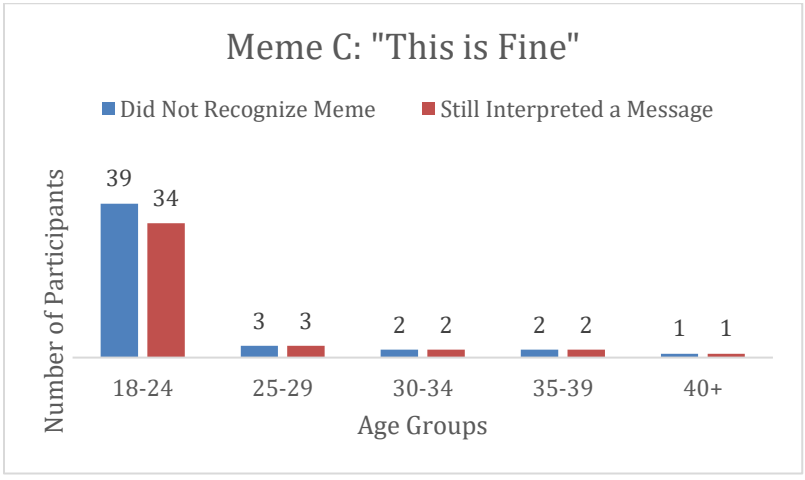


Figure 16. Participants who did not recognize Meme C that still interpreted a message by age group.

Participants also described why they felt the activists' signs were or were not effective. Each survey respondent did not discuss all three themes, but overall their responses revealed humor, familiarity and age as three factors that influenced how individuals interpreted the political internet memes.

## ANALYSIS

Memes are recognized as symbols within online communities, and the Global Climate Strike signs are an example of those symbols being used to communicate offline (in the real world). The survey responses supported other research that claims memes are effective symbols for political discourse (Westfall 2018 and Haynes 2019). Most participants, especially those ages 18-30, recognized the memes and interpreted their environmental message. Participants older than 30 were less likely to know the memes, but most still recognized the memes as symbols for the climate activists' statements. In their explanations, participants explained how the humorous tone of the memes helped them relate to and understand the signs' messages. Participants also discussed age and familiarity with climate change as other factors that impact theirs and others' ability to understand the symbols.

## HUMOR

The most popular internet memes are those with a humorous tone. A significant number of respondents (40 out of 127) discussed and evaluated the comedic usage of irony and sarcasm in the memes.

One participant said,

> "[The meme] is funny and communicates real life. It brings humor to the tragic situations of the present day."

Another person wrote,

> "The sarcastic use of comedy effectively communicates [the sign's] message."

The participants' responses confirm that individuals use humor to discuss serious events in a playful, accessible way. For example, participants noticed "Shocked Pikachu" as an ironic symbol and when asked to explain Meme A's message one respondent said,

> "[It's] the irony of human's reaction to the Earth dying despite the fact that it's our fault."

Another said,

> "Humans inflict environmental harm constantly but are "surprised" when it backfires and hurts us."

Participants also said Meme B was effective,

> "Since the sign humorously critiques the perspective of climate change deniers."

Another claimed,

> "It adds humor to a serious topic."

Meme C was widely recognized as portraying climate change inaction through a comedic lens as well. One participant described the meme's powerful use of irony,

> "[Meme C] is ironic and expresses the negligence of governments to stop the world from collapsing."

Another participant said the meme was "extremely effective" in communicating its climate change message because it is,

> "funny, visually appealing, easy to understand and well-known."

Even though each participant did not discuss the symbols' sarcastic tones, their responses overall confirm humor as an important aspect to internet memes. The responses agree with other

internet meme studies which show meme creators use comedic language to spread their message and those who view the signs believe humor makes the signs relatable and easy to understand. As well as thinking the symbols were funny, participants recognized their environmental messages and used language that revealed a familiarly with climate change concepts.

**FAMILIARITY**

Participants' answers show that individuals did interpret climate change messages from Global Climate Strike memes and suggest that participants had prior experience with environmental topics. Nearly all the respondents discussed climate change as being the message for each of the three signs (it was discussed in responses nearly 200 times). Participants discussed environmental concepts such as climate change, weather and nature throughout the responses, which showed familiarity with the topic might influence an individual's ability to interpret political messages. When asked to interpret the message of Meme 1, a participant said,

> "Look at our climate's current condition. Nature is dying and it's our only resource for food, air, and water"

Another participant wrote,

> "Humans are suffering from climate change, but they are the cause."

Respondents also shared their ideas about the interconnectedness of humans and nature. One said,

> "Since we destroy the climate we destroy ourselves in the process."

Another said,

> "Climate change will destroy humans. We will all die even though it's cold in winter."

When asked to describe Meme B's message participants compared the arguments made by climate change deniers to climate change science. One respondent said,

> "Some people's reason for not believing in climate change is that the weather is still cold sometimes."

Another respondent said,

> "[The meme is] making fun of people who do not understand what 'climate' is relative to 'weather' and disregard climate change."

Multiple respondents also mocked the intelligence of climate deniers by writing,

> "The arguments of climate change deniers are invalid and uneducated."

And,

> "People who compare weather to climate are stupid."

Participants also connected Global Climate Strike doctrine to Meme C by saying,

> "The government is complacent in the fight against climate change and is actively watching their inaction exacerbate the issue."

Participants also shared reasons why they believe governments do not act, and one person stated,

` "[The meme] shows the government refusing to combat climate change-maybe because of corporate interests."

Participants that could not interpret the memes did not discuss climate change in their responses, and they instead expressed confusion and frustration.

One participant explained,

> "No, I don't know the context of the meme."

Another said,

> "No, I don't know how a dog could communicate and symbolize a message."

The political internet memes inspired responses including climate change terminology and themes not used in the signs, such a climate vs weather and reciprocity, which demonstrates

that individuals interpret political messages from memes based on their understanding, or familiarity, with the topic. The presence of personal reflections about climate change in the responses are significant because they demonstrate that participants interpreted the internet memes as symbols for climate change messages. Respondents shared their relevant experiences and beliefs, but also expressed concern that the messages would be less effective to older viewers because of generational differences.

**AGE**

Many participants expressed the belief that the messages are exclusively understood by and relatable to younger generations rather than older ones. Thirty four out of the 127 participants were not able to interpret a message from one or more of the internet memes, and more than half of respondents discussed an individual's age as influencing the effectiveness of internet memes as a form of communication. Participants said that internet memes are effective at expressing the shared concerns and beliefs of younger generations, but they may exclude people of older generations that are not a part of online communities. Therefore, the memes conform to the theory of imagined communities based on age. The internet usage data confirms this assumption because younger participants spent more time online and recognized the memes more than older participants. For example, one respondent specifically mentioned baby boomers and said,

> "A baby boomer or someone who did not grow up watching spongebob would not get [Meme B's message]."

Participants also assumed that younger participants recognize memes more frequently than older participants. In reference to Meme B, the respondents said the effectiveness of the message

would depend on a person's age group. One person said,

> "younger generations are more likely to connect to a meme."

Another person said,

> "older generations most likely do not understand."

According to participants, communicating using internet memes is stereotypical behavior for younger generations. A respondent from the 18-24 age group said,

> "memes have become a token for our generations feelings to me [it appears that] we use memes as heuristics to communicate our feelings."

Some respondents feel that including internet memes in the signs excludes people who may not recognize the memes or already know about climate change. One respondent said,

> "[meme 2] communicated the message well by grabbing the attention of people familiar with the meme format, but it could be alienating to those who don't understand climate change."

While participants of younger age groups may be more likely to recognize an internet meme the data revealed a majority of individuals who do not recognize internet memes still interpreted a political message from the sign. Figures 14-16 demonstrate that older participants are more likely to accurately interpret the message from an internet meme they do not recognize than younger participants. A participant suggested that the messages are effective based on an individual's understanding of climate change and not just their age group.

Another participant in the 35-39 age group did not recognize Meme A but accurately interpreted the Global Climate Strike activist's message of,

> "Human activity has an effect on climate and vice versa."

Overall, content analysis of participant responses demonstrates that individuals believe using internet memes as symbols to communicate excludes older generations from the message. While some older individuals may still interpret a message, they agreed that the internet memes

were not the most effective way to discuss climate change outside of online communities. However, internet memes being shared and recognized outside of their digital contexts demonstrate that they are becoming effective forms of communicating political discourse according to the emergent thesis and existing research. Additional studies about the symbolic usage of internet memes should seek to understand older generation's interpretations and familiarity with internet memes.

## CONCLUSION

Climate change is a popular political and environmental discussion in real life and online. Existing research argues that humorous internet memes are powerful symbols for communicating shared political ideologies. Content analysis of survey responses to Global Climate Strike memes revealed three factors that influence individuals' interpretations of those symbols: humor, familiarity and age. Comedic memes are more popular and relatable, and individuals also rely on their understanding of the topic to interpret political symbols. Individuals under 30 years old spend more time online and are more likely to recognize internet memes. Therefore, younger people who are a part of digital, imagined communities are more likely to use internet memes as symbols to communicate. Future research should continue to explore the symbolic usage of internet memes and their linguistic significance, especially for younger generations. Perhaps internet memes are evolving into their own language, and thus more research is needed to explore these exciting symbols and those that use them.

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## APPENDIX I: INTERNET MEME SURVEY

1. What age range best describes you?
    a. Under 18
    b. 18-24
    c. 25-29
    d. 30-34
    e. 35-39
    f. 40+
2. On average, how many hours per day do you spend on the internet?
    a. Less than 1
    b. 1-2
    c. 3-5
    d. 6-9
    e. 10+
3. On average, how many internet memes do you see per day? (including ones sent to you)
    a) Less than 1
    b) 1-9
    c) 10-19
    d) 20-29
    e) 30-39
    f) 40-49
    g) 50+
4. I. Do you recognize the internet meme on this sign? If so, what do you call it?

    II. What is this sign's message?

    III. Does this sign effectively communicate its message? Why or why not?

5. I. Do you recognize the internet meme on this sign? If so, what do you call it?

    II. What is this sign's message?

    III. Does this sign effectively communicate its message? Why or why not?

6. I. Do you recognize the internet meme on this sign? If so, what do you call it?

    II. What is this sign's message?

    III. Does this sign effectively communicate its message? Why or why not?