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# It's All in a Meme: A Content Analysis of Memes Posted to 2012 Presidential Election Facebook Pages

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It's All in a Meme: A Content Analysis of Memes Posted to  
2012 Presidential Election Facebook Pages

It's All in a Meme: A Content Analysis of Memes Posted to  
2012 Presidential Election Facebook Pages

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts in Journalism

By

Bobbie J. Foster  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism, 2012

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis was an exploratory study to understand how Democrats and Republicans design memes, use traditional media framing, and how memes fit into modern humor theories. The study explores the relationship between the traditional media frames of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and the sure loser (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) and the commentary added by Internet users to these images in the memes.

The study also applies the benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) to the analysis of memes to understand the design choices made by meme creators. The benign-violation theory states that a physical or psychological violation is benign if 1) an alternative norm suggests the violation is acceptable, 2) the users have a weak or loose connection to the violated norm, and 3) there is a physical and psychological distance between the users and the violated norm (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

The majority of memes used san serif font, in multiple colors, and a mix of capital and lowercase letters. A chi-square revealed no significant relationship between party leaning and meme design. Most of Obama's memes portrayed him as the ideal candidate, and most of Romney's memes portrayed him as the populist campaigner. A chi-square revealed a significant relationship between Romney's image and incongruity, and the results suggest that his image as the populist campaigner were transformed into an "un-populist campaigner" frame. A chi-square revealed a significant relationship between Obama's image and the use of photographic manipulation, but Obama's images appears to be more flattering in all of his memes. Finally, all three of the benign-violation theory criteria were applied to discuss why the memes were designed and posted for specific Facebook pages in 2012.

*Keywords:* media framing, memes, 2012 presidential election, benign-violation theory, humor

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An acknowledgment is due to the other graduate students who helped me revise and code parts of this thesis. Work like this always requires an extra pair of eyes and ears to find and correct errors.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my friends and family, who encourage me to follow my passions, work hard, and explore the world around me. This thesis would not be possible without wine with friends, long conversations with my mother, father, and sister, and wonderful dinners with my significant other. Thank you all for taking care of me.

This thesis is also dedicated to the odd, ever changing, and puzzling Internet community. Without the creative ideas of the online community, this thesis would not exist. I would have been forced to write about political advertising or FOX News.

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## **It's All in a Meme: A Content Analysis of Memes Posted to 2012 Presidential Election Facebook Pages**

One feature of American politics has always been true; a politician's image means everything to his or her political career (Iyengar, 2011). Anderson and Sheeler (2014) argue that candidate image is shaped by "image fragments generated by the individual politician, his or her campaign communication, news framing, and popular culture," but increasingly "a politician's image also can be shaped by non-elite discourses" generated by social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr (p.225). Social media has introduced new ways for voters to influence media coverage during election cycles, and this form of participation takes the shape of Internet memes (Shifman, 2014). This study will start by defining what Internet memes are, then distinguish what design features Democrat or Republican-leaning Facebook users might utilize in their memes. This study will also explore how the visual nature of Internet memes fits perfectly with the visual nature of modern U.S. politics. Finally, this study will examine how memes could use humor as a vehicle for finding like-minded users on Democrat or Republican-leaning Facebook pages.

Memes are commonly defined as a piece of culture that can be replicated or generated by humans to help evolve society (Dawkins, 1976). Memes studies can range from the different types of pottery used in ancient societies to the study of user-generated and replicated YouTube videos (Shifman, 2012). For this study, Internet memes are defined as repeating video loops called .GIFs, image macros, or photographs with words superimposed on them to create commentary for the image, and videos clips posted to social media websites like YouTube or Vine.

This paper will focus on image macros created by users for the purpose of communicating political thoughts and opinions on Facebook within groups during the 2012 Presidential election. As the influence of social media communication grows with each passing election, it is important to understand what memes are saying about candidates, and if memes for different political parties vary by design features like font type, font color, references to popular culture, the use of capital or lowercased letters, and the use of offensive language. Once a meme language can be defined, political campaign strategists can use this common language to access voters through social media.

Shifman (2014) argues that memes are defined by their common characteristics: simplicity, presence of attempts at humor, and their featuring of common people, but she does not say if those characteristics can change based on political preference. In other words do Republican memes look different from Democratic memes? Or does a meme's appearance have to meet a common set of criteria before anyone, despite political preference, defines and uses the image, .GIF or video as a meme? Studies also suggest that memes are used as a form of political participation (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Shifman, 2014). However these studies do not explore to what extent the users participate or relate memes to more traditional media framing, which is a term used to describes the way media presentation can characterize an issue to influence how audiences understand it (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; , Iyengar, 2011). Do voters use the same forms of political framing that traditional media uses, and in the same way, or do they alter or violate the traditional political media frames?

This thesis proposes a study of political memes posted to user-created 2012 Presidential Facebook pages for the purpose of cataloging common features and explaining the relationship users have with traditional media framing of candidates. Facebook was chosen because it has a

timeline feature that other social media websites do not have, allowing an examination of posts by searching for specific dates and times; in this case the last full week before the Presidential election, October 28 to November 3, 2012, was used as the timeline for gathering a sample of 69 memes. This was the last week for users to post memes before the election results were known. This thesis will act as a pilot study to explore the relationship voters have with memes on social media websites such as Facebook. A codebook using the coding scheme created by Grabe and Bucy (2009) will be tested and developed for future use for political meme studies.

Because past studies have found that memes often rely on humor (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Shifman, 2012), this thesis will also apply the three criteria for the benign-violation theory of humor created by McGraw and Warren (2010), which states that humor is derived from threatening violations of psychological and physical spaces that are simultaneously perceived to be benign, or non-threatening. The three criteria a joke must meet to be considered a benign-violation are 1) the presence of an alternative norm suggesting a situation is acceptable, 2) a weak commitment to the violated norm, and 3) a psychological distance from the violation (McGraw & Warren, 2010). To understand how Facebook users manipulate or interact with political memes, the three criteria of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) will be applied to the meme sample to find if an alternative norm suggests that making fun of the candidate in the meme is acceptable, and if the users post the memes to groups with weak commitments to the candidate. And finally if Facebook allows for enough psychological distance for users to consider the violation of the candidate's image benign.

**Competing Definitions of Memes.** There are two different definitions of memes, a traditional look at memes as elements of culture, and the popular culture definition of memes as user-

generated media online. In 1976, Richard Dawkins proposed in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, that culture, like genes, had evolved over time. He called these adapting elements of culture, memes, after the Greek word “mimeme” meaning imitation (Dawkins 1976). Twenty-three years later, in her book, *The Meme Machine*, Susan Blackmore (1999) said to understand what memes are, one must first understand that memes, like genes, are replicators and the success of a meme depends on its replication or copied behavior among humans. Examples of memes and replicated behavior given by both Blackmore (1999) and Dawkins (1976) are fashion, music, and other cultural artifacts such as religion or politics. Blackmore (1999) and Dawkins (1976) fall into the traditional definition of memes insisting that memes can be anything within culture that can be quantified and replicated. However, the term has been adapted to examine a new popular culture phenomenon.

In the book, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman (2014) argued that the word meme could be used as a relevant term to understand a wide variety of contemporary behaviors. Knobel and Lankshear (2006) defined memes as “widely propagated ideas or phenomena” online (p. 217). The word meme is now used as short hand for Internet memes, or image macros, .GIFs, videos, and email chains online. The development of the popular culture definition of a meme has led to both broad and narrow definitions of the word.

The word meme is often used as an analytical tool to understand a cultural practice (Shifman, 2012). Flammini, Menczer, Vespignani, and Weng (2012) used an operational definition of a meme by limiting their study to Twitter hashtags, which are slogans or subjects trending on Twitter to relate ideas or information to followers by using the “#” symbol or “hashtag” before a word or words. Anderson and Sheeler (2014) used a similar definition for a meme in their study of Hillary Clinton’s use of the Twitter hashtag, #tweetsfromhillary,

referencing the existing meme “Texts from Hillary,” a popular Tumblr blog featuring an image macro created from a photograph then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reading her BlackBerry.

Shifman and Thelwall (2009) used an operational definition of memes to describe an online joke about upgrading a spouse from a girlfriend or boyfriend to a husband or wife. And some studies have restricted the definition of a meme to YouTube videos (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Shifman, 2012). In each of these studies an operational definition was created to tailor the broader definition of a meme to a workable definition for gathering samples. In each case, memes were a type of online activity; in some cases memes are limited only to Twitter hashtags and in others, a genera of memes such as “LOLCats,” or pictures of cats featuring grammatically incorrect statements from the cat’s point of view, (Miltner, 2012) are studied. In reality, all online activity could be considered a meme, which is part of the difficulty of studying such a broad subject. In her book, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman (2014) defines Internet memes as groups of items with similar characteristics that can be quantified. But even this definition is very broad, just like the traditional definition put forward by Dawkins (1976) of memes as evolving elements of culture.

**Common Design of Memes** Shifman (2012) found that the memes she examined contained six common features: a focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, and whimsical content. Miltner’s (2012) focus group study of “LOLCats” memes, which feature cute cats speaking with incorrect grammatical English asking for cheeseburgers, found that several design elements appealed to people: font, subject of image, and syntax, implying that specific design features attract users to memes. Miltner (2012) also found that different groups of people responded differently or extracted different meanings from

the “LOLCats” memes. So when the cats in the meme referred to video games, only subjects that identified as “gamers” found those memes appealing (Miltner, 2012).

In her thesis, Decker-Maurere (2012) argued that common characteristics of memes such as font, linguistic style, and inter-textually allowed users to build an online identity based on what they liked or understood from memes. Decker-Maurere (2012) argued that people would use memes in the same way they use bumper stickers or campaign signs to advertise and build a political identity such as Republican or Democrat (Decker-Maurere, 2012). If this is true, Facebook users will share and like memes that advertise the way they intend to vote in upcoming elections. Memes are then a form of political communication, as Anderson and Sheeler (2014) argue, “supporters can then drive the message through sharing, retweeting, and otherwise disseminating relevant text, images, or hyperlinks” (p.228).

Adding to the popular culture definition of a meme the first part of this study will catalog the most common design features found in the memes posted in late October 2012 to political Facebook pages in order to better define and understand what similar characteristics memes posted on both Republican and Democrat-leaning pages possess. If design elements are similar across political party affiliations, perhaps memes have developed a common design language that can be used for further analysis defining memes by common characteristics. Research question 1 asks if there is a common design language based on political party affiliations.

**Framing Theory, From TV to Memes.** The Internet is visual by nature, and as Iyengar (2011) argued the basic maxim of American politics is that image is everything (Iyengar, 2011). Political parties have noticed the voting base moving to an online format of gathering news and talking about politics. But as the water-cooler conversations have moved to social media, have

the same image handling tactics once used for television moved to new media? Iyengar (2011) defined media framing as “the way in which the media by highlighting some aspects of an event or issue and ignoring others, can influence how people think about that event or issue” (p. 253) Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) define media framing as how issue characterization in news reports can influence audience understanding of that issue. The news media are not the only driving force behind candidate media frames; politicians and campaign managers also use frames to persuade voters (Iyengar, 2011).

As Iyengar (2011) points out “other frames are inserted into the news by politicians and candidates in pursuit of political advantage” (p. 255). Azari and Vaughn (2014) analyzed 241 presidential communications from President Obama after the 2008 and 2010 elections using data from Public Papers of the President to find words or phrases related to the elections, like “reason I was elected” and “promises in my campaign.” They found that in 2008 President Obama framed the results of the election as a clear dislike of Republican governing, but after the 2010 election President Obama framed the results as a call for bipartisanship (Azari & Vaughn, 2014). Political media framing does not end with memos and speeches, now candidates can release frames on social media. Bronstein (2013) examined the text posts made by the official Mitt Romney and Barack Obama Facebook pages during the 2012 Presidential election. She collected 513 posts during the last three months of the 2012 election. She found that both candidates used emotional and motivational appeals to create social capital, or public displays of support on Facebook including shares, likes, and comments, without actually revealing much about their personal lives. The posts mostly consisted of information on a small number of non-controversial subjects, such as polling places, reminders to vote, and campaign stops.

These studies, however, focus on verbal or textual analysis to find media frames and leave out the influence that visual communication news photographs, videos, and candidate images can create (Grabe and Bucy, 2009). Douai (2010) argues that “the preoccupation with the construction and production of frames in media discourse, however, seems to have a largely been limited to the traditional ‘textural’ aspects of news stories, notwithstanding a deeper appreciation of the impact of visuals on larger news frames” (p.178). In their book, *Image Bite Politics*, Grabe and Bucy (2009) argue that communications specialists have largely neglected image analysis. This is unfortunate because campaigns have focused on creating a visually viable candidate since the 1960 televised debates between Nixon and Kennedy. Journalists and historians have argued that Kennedy won the election based on his appearance during those debates.

Ball (2010) used a content analysis of media frames developed by Grabe and Bucy (2009), as well as additions of analysis for eye blink rate, camera angle and length of shot to quantify the visual performance of Nixon and Kennedy during the first televised debates. He found that not only did Nixon have inappropriate facial displays such as smiling and rapid eye blinks, but that the camera angles and the size of the shots used also contributed to the picture of Kennedy as the stronger, more TV friendly candidate (Ball, 2010). Ball (2010) argued that Kennedy won the election based on the visual appearance he gave during those debates and that Kennedy was in fact better at manipulating the new media of television; just as Obama was able to better manipulate the new media of online social networks in the 2008 election.

Content analysis of political images has become a standard in visual analysis of media frames. Douai (2010) argued that “content analysis of visual data is quite common in visual framing studies” (p. 179). Grabe and Bucy (2009) argue that most studies of media framing of candidate personality traits focus on positive and negative imagery and not specifically the more



“nuanced character frame-building dimensions” used by campaigns through the media to help define the characteristics of a candidate (p. 101). By examining television coverage of several campaigns in the 1990s and 2000s, Grabe and Bucy (2009) developed three different frames used most in the media to communicate to voters what type of candidate each party selected. Those frames were the ideal candidate, the populist campaigner, and the sure loser (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). The ideal candidate shows compassion by hugging supporters and kissing babies, but also presents himself in a stately manner by wearing suits and being seen with other established leading politicians (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). The populist campaigner frame is used to convey that a candidate is one of the ordinary people by wearing informal clothes, visiting factories and farms, and associating with large crowds or celebrities (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). The sure loser frame is exactly how it sounds, the candidate makes inappropriate facial displays, such as frowning or scowling, and he is seen with small or disapproving crowds (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). These same frames have been found online used by campaigns to communicate to voters.

In a photo analysis of images posted by the Presidential campaigns to 2012 Facebook pages representing each Presidential candidate, Goodnow (2013) found that Mitt Romney posted 300 images to his Facebook Timeline, and most often used patriotic symbols like flags to associate the candidate with leadership qualities. President Obama’s campaign posted fewer than half of that number, and most of his images depicted him in the White House looking away from the camera down at papers on his desk, talking with world leaders, or with his back turned to the camera (Goodnow, 2013). Although, the Obama administration introduced a White House Tumblr page and regularly posts images online, it is possible that Romney will be featured most in memes posted to Facebook because his campaign released more images to Facebook, making it easier for users to share and download images to use as memes. Goodnow (2013) argued that

Obama did not have to establish himself as a leader or pose with other politicians or patriotic symbols the way Romney did in his photos because as an incumbent President, Barack Obama had spent four years developing images establishing his leadership. Like the Goodnow (2013) study, this study will likely find more images of Romney than Obama because Romney's images are new and abundant on Facebook during the campaign, so more memes will be made from the images Goodnow (2013) found in her study. Politicians have been slow to embrace the reposting memes developed from media frames.

Coleman, Shifman, and Ward (2007) monitored 20 political party websites, four viral email "joke" listservs, and well-established satire websites similar to The Onion, and finally ad hoc sites and sections of the mass media online that were dedicated to the 2005 UK general election. Both the Bronstein (2013) and Coleman et al. (2007) studies found campaigns avoided controversial or potentially offensive material in their messaging, even though new media. Now the strategic image handling for online media, like when President Barack Obama appeared on the popular YouTube series *Between Two Ferns with Zack Galifianakis*, to discuss Obamacare, stray away from focusing on possibly offensive material, like Republicans, Congress, and critics of Affordable Care Act. Instead, the focus was more about the contrast between the comedian and the president. However, some politicians no longer running for office will take advantage of an existing meme and use the frame to set him or her apart. Anderson and Sheeler (2014) analyzed Hillary Clinton's reuse of the "Text from Hillary" meme to create her own meme when she joined Twitter as a hashtag "#tweetsfromhillary." Anderson and Sheeler (2014) argue that "Clinton's Twitter debut illustrates a new type of strategic image management [...] in which politicians attempt to capitalize on existing memes that originate from outside the sphere of information elites" (p.225)

A number of past studies (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Shifman, 2012) using the popular culture definition of a meme have found that online memes contain an element of manipulation of a popular video or photograph to change the original meaning or comment on a particular aspect of culture, such as the “All Your Base Are Belong to Us” meme (correct spelling), that grew from the mistranslation of the video game *Zero Wing* in the early 1990s (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Shifman, 2012). This meme started as a critique of the mistranslation of the game from Japanese to English, but soon the meme grew into a larger commentary about whatever the user posting the meme decided to repurpose the phrase or general meaning behind the meme to fit (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). If politics are visual and campaigns struggle to control a candidate’s image then the struggle would continue online as more voters are able to actively participate in election coverage. So research question 2 asks if the political frames of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser (Grabe and Bucy, 2009) will be present in memes as users look for original images of candidates to manipulate, or if users will attempt to create their own media frames without the use of more traditional media frames found in newspapers and television.

**Memes as Political Participation and Communication** Internet memes have quickly adapted to comment on a range of political issues in several countries, but there is still some debate about how memes function as a form of political communication. Shifman (2014) argues that memes are used as a form of political participation, and that this participation can be broken into three categories: memes as persuasion, memes as grassroots action, and memes as models of expression. Shifman (2014) uses the “Obama Girl” video, a video created by a young girl singing about her crush on candidate Barack Obama during the 2008 campaign, as an example of memes as political persuasion. She argues that voters are more influenced by friends

and peers than they are mass media campaigns (Shifman, 2014). Videos like the “Obama Girl” meme can use simple, cheap video editing and creation to send a persuasive message out to a large community. Memes, like “Obama Girl” can also become widely popular because there is no focus on campaign issues like immigration or healthcare, but rather a praise or criticism of the way a candidate looks or a campaign presents him. As Grabe and Bucy (2009) argue visual candidate framing can be very important to a campaign, and the “Obama Girl” video is an example of users creating a meme as a way to participate and comment on the media framing of Barack Obama as a young, attractive, and hip candidate.

Shifman (2014) defines memes as grass-roots action with the use of the Occupy Wall Street online movement. The movement did exist in the physical world, but the meme of the “Pepper Spray Cop,” a photograph of a police officer causally spraying a group of protesters with pepper spray, became a worldwide phenomenon and a call to action for the protest to continue. “The Pepper Spray Cop” meme became a symbol of institutional oppression online, and was used to represent a number of political parties and governments in a negative light (Shifman, 2014).

Shifman (2014) also defined political memes as a form of expression or public discussion. She argued that memes could function as a form of protest, like the “Pepper Spray Cop” meme, or they could be a catalyst for political discussion (Shifman, 2014). The best example of a meme prompting political discussion is the 2013 “Big Yellow Duck of Tiananmen Square” meme. On the anniversary of the Tiananmen protests, the Chinese government censored all online searches and photographs of the event, even going as far as removing the word “today” from search engines, but one enterprising individual edited out the tanks from the famous picture of a man standing in front of the tanks as they entered Tiananmen Square, and replaced those with big

yellow rubber ducks. Users could then search for rubber duck to get a glimpse at or post the famous photograph. An international debate about government media censorship was sparked by the meme, making it the vehicle for political discourse. Memes can also represent a political idea or candidate, providing a new opportunity to frame a candidate or issue outside of traditional media.

In a study of 50 versions of the “Hitler Reacts” or the “Downfall” memes, in which a scene from the German film “Untergang” translated to “Downfall” has new subtitles placed in it to match Hitler’s rant against the Russians coming to Berlin, 13 were analyzed as focusing on national politics (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012). Hitler often acted as a stand-in for a party or political representative on the national scene (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012). Users viewed representatives of the party as being like Hitler, or at least like an angry, bitter dictator losing his ground in war. In one video, Hitler represents Hillary Clinton during the 2008 primary race (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012). The user who created this video is framing Clinton as an angry racist and losing fascist. Although Clinton’s image is never directly used, quotes pulled from the news and events she has participated in are used in the translated dialog to indicate that the ranting Hitler is Hillary Clinton (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012). Social media and YouTube have provided users a chance to do their own media framing, or at the very least play with the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames found in traditional media by Grabe and Bucy (2009).

Knobel and Lankshear (2006) found in their sample of memes that most of the political memes were created as a form of social critique. They gave the “Nike Memo” meme, in which a user wrote a fake memo from the Nike Company to consumers about the use of illegal underage and underpaid labor to make their shoes as an example of social critique (Knobel & Lankshear,

2006). They argue that the user who wrote the “Nike Memo” meme wanted to create a humorous, but easily accessible social critique about U.S.-based large corporate labor practices (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). Although Shifman (2014), and Knobel and Lankshear (2006) look at the use of memes as political participation, they do not look into the extent to which voters use memes to interact or change traditional media framing of candidates.

A popular example of users playing with traditional media framing would be the re-edit of the Miley Cyrus video, “Wrecking Ball,” to include Senator Ted Cruz’s face. The video was changed by a YouTube user to include Senator Ted Cruz’s face in place of Miley Cyrus’s face in the video; the capital building and mushroom cloud were also added after traditional media outlets began to cover Ted Cruz and other prominent Tea Party Republicans during the November 2013 government shutdown. This meme has evolved online to include copies of a small segment of the video in the form of a .GIF that repeats itself over again, and image macros of still frames taken from the video with text indicating something Cyrus/Cruz would say or imply. The user was playing with popular culture images like the famous Cyrus music video, and news coverage from traditional media outlets to create a new way of looking at Senator Cruz and other congressional representatives. But did the user intend to frame Cruz as the sure loser, by placing him in a confusing and inappropriate place for a congressional member (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) or was the user trying to create his own frame to look at the senator?

If memes are visual and politics are visual, then it stands to reason that an understanding of the way they interact will not only add to scholarship, but will allow campaign strategists to plan for an ever growing online media influence during and after elections. This study will use the categories of political framing created by Grabe and Bucy (2009) in their book *Image Bite Politics*, to analyze how Facebook users participate in politics by changing or reinforcing the

ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames created by traditional news media outlets and campaign image handlers. Two questions need to be asked: will these changes be a visible way to tell if a user is a Democrat or Republican? Will political party affiliation affect how each candidate is portrayed in the memes posted to Facebook?

**Benign-Violation in Memes** Humor appears to be a common element in past content analysis of Internet memes to shape the popular culture definition of a meme (Knobel and Lankshear, 2006; Shifman, 2014). Blackmore (1999) wrote that memes need a vehicle, such as language, to allow easy access for users to understand and replicate the behaviors or ideas reflected in the meme. Humor is the vehicle that most memes transmit through to infect social media users.

Shifman (2012) coded for three types of humor: superiority, playfulness, and incongruity. Shifman (2006) defined superiority as memes that featured protagonists that were not intentionally being funny, and the audience laughed at the expense of these protagonists. An example Shifman (2006) gave was the “Star Wars Kid,” a video where a child fights with a broomstick as a light saber. Shifman argued that the video was not scripted and was made for a serious purpose, so it is an example of an unintentional funny moment. However, without interviewing the “Star Wars Kid” himself, there is no way of telling what the intentions of the video were leaving us to speculate. Playfulness was defined as videos that were clearly made to be humorous; these videos included devised situations to be funny (Shifman, 2006). For example the 5-second film videos, which are scripted, edited, and timed jokes devised to give a punch line in 5 seconds or less toward the camera with an audience in mind. Finally, incongruity, defined as an unexpected mix-up of elements that would not be together normally, an example would be the video featuring a dancing banana, because bananas do not have legs and do not dance (Shifman, 2012). However, there can be overlap between these types of humor, making it difficult to

categorize the humor used in memes. For instance, the incongruity of a child fighting like a Jedi or playful situations purposely derived to be incongruous, like the 5-second film video “Fastest Feather in the West,” where a cowboy uses a pillow, rather than a gun, to defeat his dueling partner.

In another study of memes, humor was an element in 17 of the 19 memes that were popular in both online and mainstream media during a five-year period, from 2001 to 2005 (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). Knobel and Lankshear (2006) measured two different types of humor, situational humor and social commentary. Situational humor is defined as humor that arose out of specific or unplanned situations, much like Shifman’s (2012) definition of superiority. Social commentary memes feature jokes made about social or political problems (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). For example, a situational humor meme is the “Charlie Bit Me” meme, in which two small children talk to the camera and the youngest, Charlie, bites his older brother’s finger after the older brother deliberately puts his finger in Charlie’s mouth. Social commentary humor is found in the “Almost Politically Correct Redneck” memes, in which a photograph of a white man with a mullet and no shirt has words relating ideas about Republicans and Affirmative Action, or other inappropriate twists on conservative and liberal ideology superimposed as commentary from that character. Five of the 19 memes contained social commentary jokes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006).

Knobel and Lankshear (2006) also found incongruity in memes, defining incongruity as two images or ideas that would not normally occur together being edited to fit together for the meme. Sometimes incongruity arose from situations and sometimes it was used to make a social comment. A popular example of a situational incongruity meme is the “Better Amercia” (correct spelling) meme generated during the 2012 campaign. The Republicans created an app for users



to take pictures and share what would make a better America, but there was a misspelling in the text used by the app. Smart phone users then took advantage of the incongruity of the misspelled word, and the serious nature of the message by adding the misspelling to photographs of Simpsons characters and Republican or Democrat candidates to create memes and share them on social media websites. Most of the past studies of humor in memes focus on more dated humor theories, using memes to define satire (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012) or looking at Plato's superiority (Shifman 2012), but meme studies lack an updated look at humor theories, such as the benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), which argues that humor evolved from threat evaluation. A threat is considered benign, or humorous, if it is physically and psychologically distant from the person who perceives the threat (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Because memes often display incongruities, the benign-violation theory of humor developed by McGraw and Warren (2010) can be used to analyze the way memes are constructed, but also why different memes are successful within different communities online. Benign-violation theory states that three conditions must be met before something that would normally be a physical or psychological violation is considered funny or benign (McGraw & Warren, 2010). First, McGraw and Warren (2010) argue "a) a salient norm suggests something is wrong, but another salient norm suggests that it is acceptable, b) one is only weakly committed to the violated norm, and c) the violation is psychologically distant" (p.1142) to make a violation benign. Incongruities found in memes coded by Dias da Silva and Garcia (2012), Knobel and Lankshear (2006), and Shifman (2012) can also be a benign-violation that contributes to the popularity and humor of the meme. An example given by Knobel and Lankshear (2006) was the "Evil Bert" meme that featured the beloved Sesame Street character popular among children with an angry face and a knife. Evil Bert began to wreak havoc all over the Internet. Because

Bert is a fictional character and not really a person, psychological distance allows users to find the meme funny rather than offensive (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; McGraw & Warren, 2010). A more recent example of a tragic event that was turned into a meme is the “Hide Your Kids” meme, taken from a news report of a man who fought off his sister’s rapist in the middle of the night in their apartment. His interview was so outrageous that it was soon remixed to produce a song. Although the event was tragic to the family the meme became an Internet sensation.

This study argues that successful memes meet the three criteria of benign-violation theory: 1) an alternative norm suggests the violation is acceptable, 2) the users will have weak connections to the violated norm, and 3) a psychological distance is great enough between the user and the violated norm to make the violation funny (McGraw & Warren, 2010). The existing norm in the case of political memes will not only be political leanings, Republicans or Democrats, but the typical media frames: the ideal candidate, the populist campaigner, and the sure loser that Grabe and Bucy (2009) found presented by past campaigns. Users will violate these images by adding text or photographic manipulation of the image originally published by news media outlets or the campaigns to make a joke about the candidate. They will participate in the creation of candidate images to express an opinion within the overall media discussion about politics, just as Shifman (2014) argues. This study will look for users to 1) make jokes about candidates that are inappropriate, but still acceptable, 2) post memes about candidates they disagree with in Facebook groups that share their opinions, and 3) users will create a distance from themselves and the candidate or subject of the meme (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

**Literature Review Summary** Currently, there are two competing definitions of a meme, the traditional definition started by Dawkins (1976) of a meme as an element of culture ranging from fashion to religion, and the popular culture definition developed to describe media shared online

by users, often referred to as Internet or online memes (Decker-Muarere, 2012; Dia da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Miltner, 2012; Shifman, 2014; Shifman, 2012). To help limit and shape the popular culture definition of a meme, this study defines memes as user-generated content in the form of a .GIF, image macro, or video manipulated from the original material or created to express a particular thought or ideology about the subject matter contained in the meme. The content analysis will catalog common design elements like font type and color to better define what characteristics comprise a meme for future research.

As politics move to the Internet where more and more voters get their news and information, it is important to understand how users process and play with political messages. This study will focus on memes created and shared to Facebook pages supporting either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney in the last full week before the 2012 Presidential election. To better understand how users participate with political image creation, the media frames found by Grabe and Bucy (2009) will be used as a tool for analysis to understand what the original intention of the image handlers was in contrast to the changes made by Facebook users. Media framing theory states the presentation of an issue or problem to an audience can change the audience opinion (Iyengar, 2011; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Grabe and Bucy (2009) argue that framing also extends to the visual realm, and because humans are visually orientated creatures it is important to understand how framing visuals can alter opinions, especially as more voters receive their political information online. During the 2012 election, the Pew Research Center found that 22% of registered voters shared how they voted on Facebook during the Election Day. Before social media voters were limited to letters to the editor or calling into radio or television shows, which undergo an editorial selection process. Social media allows users to publish their opinions so that friends, family, and strangers can read these posts and comment back. For years

journalists and campaign specialist controlled the framing process, so will voters now exercise their ability to generate media and commentary to effect the framing, like the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames developed by Grabe and Bucy (2009).

Finally, this study will apply the three criteria of the benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) which are: 1) an alternative suggests the violation is acceptable, 2) there is a weak connection to the violated norm, and 3) there is a psychological distance between the person and the violated norm, to analyze how Facebook users violated candidate images to make memes. By first using Grabe and Bucy's (2009) media coding scheme for the ideal candidate, the populist campaigner, and the sure loser, this study will categorize how the manipulated images frame about the candidate, then using the three criteria of benign-violation (McGraw & Warren, 2010) the study will categorize how the images were manipulated, and if there is an alternative that makes the manipulation okay, if the meme was posted to a page where users have a weak connection to the political party, and if there is enough of a psychological distance between the users and the candidates to make the violation acceptable content to post to Facebook.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

There are three hypotheses based upon the research from the literature review. First, based on the popular culture definition of a meme as an element of culture that has common quantifiable features and design elements based on the studies of Decker-Maurere (2012), Knobel and Lankshear (2006), Miltner (2012), and Shifman (2014) this study asks if memes posted to political Facebook pages share common characteristics based on political party leaning.

**Hypothesis 1:** Memes will be easily identifiable by political parties based on common design elements, such as font type and color.

**Null Hypothesis 1:** Design elements will not reflect a specific political party.

Next, based on the relationship politics already have with traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television (Anderson & Sheeler, 2014; Azari & Vaughn, 2014; Ball, 2010; Douai, 2010; Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Iyengar, 2011; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), this study asks if voters will exercise an ability to create their own political frames for candidates or if they will continue to use the same political frames of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser outlined by Grabe and Bucy (2009).

**Hypothesis 2:** Internet users will continue to use traditional media frames, like the populist campaigner and ideal candidate images developed by Grabe and Bucy (2009), to frame candidates and political news in memes.

**Null Hypothesis 2:** Internet users will develop their own political media fame in memes to reflect differences between new media and traditional media coverage of the 2012 presidential election.

Finally, this study asks if users violate the political images of candidates to create an incongruity or potentially humorous meme. If users do manipulate the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) the three criteria of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) can be used as an analytical tool to explain why the meme exists on a particular Facebook page because users will post memes that; 1) that have an alternative norm that makes the manipulation of the photograph okay, 2) to Facebook pages that share a weak connection to the violated party or candidate, and 3) Facebook will create enough of a psychological and physical distance to make the violation acceptable (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

**Hypothesis 3:** Benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) can be used to explain the location of memes and how the meme was created during the 2012 Presidential election, because memes will meet the three criteria of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010): users will only manipulate photos to reflect an alternative norm making the violation acceptable, they will post memes to Facebook pages where users share a weak connection to the candidate, and finally, the digital space will create a psychological and physical distance making the violation okay to view.

**Null Hypothesis 3:** Benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) cannot be used to explain the location of memes and how the meme was created during the 2012 Presidential election, because users will manipulate photos however they would like despite alternative norms, they will not post memes to Facebook pages where users share a weak connection to the candidate, and the digital space will not create enough of a psychological and physical distance to make the violation benign.

### **Methods**

Facebook was chosen because it is one of the most popular social media sites (Coming and Going on Facebook, n.d.), and it has a search bar function for Facebook groups based on key words. It enables users to segregate themselves based on affinity, common knowledge, and ideologies such as Democrat and Republican, by “liking” or following Facebook pages created by organizations and other users, and it has the timeline feature which allows users to look at posts to the page during specific dates and times in the page history (Limperos et al., 2010). By keeping a log of posts and times that are available for viewing, the timeline feature allows the researcher to look only at memes posted with in the week of October 28 to November 3, 2012.

For each meme the page name, the date of the posting, and the number of shares, likes and comments were recorded along with the coding (Limperos et al., 2010).

Limperos et al. (2010) found that Facebook automatically ranks pages by placing the most popular, defined as having the largest membership or number of “likes,” at the top of the search results. For this thesis, a convenience sample of memes was gathered from the first eight pages found under a search for each candidate, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, with timelines that extended back to October 2012. The Facebook pages were found by using each candidate’s name in the Facebook search box (Limperos et. al., 2010). Using the screen capture feature for Mozilla Firefox for Mac, 37 “Obama” memes were collected along with 32 “Romney” memes on 16 different Facebook pages on December 12, 2013 one year after the 2012 Presidential election (Limperos et al., 2010). The total number of memes gathered was 69. Other meme studies of this kind have kept relatively small sample sizes, like Dias da Silva and Garcia (2012) who examined 50 YouTube videos, and Knobel and Lankshear (2006), who examined a sample of 19 memes ranging from email chains to photographs. However, this sample is small compared to the Facebook photo and text studies by Goodnow (2012) who gathered more than 300 images from each candidate’s Facebook page, and Bronstein (2013) who gathered 513 text posts from each candidate’s Facebook page. This puts the study at a disadvantage because the convenience sample cannot yield a statistically significant number of memes for the analysis. It is also not representative of the larger population of memes found on a number of social media websites like Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and Imagur.

Table 1.

*The names of the 16 Facebook pages used to gather memes, and the number of likes per page in descending order.*

Page Name	Number of Likes
1 Million Strong Defeated Mitt Romney in 2012	342,000
1 Million People to Defeat Barack Obama	164,545
Mitt Romney Central	114,231
I Voted for Barack Obama in 2012	83,508
Barack Obama.IR	32,773
Mitt Romney Sucks	30,141
President Barack Obama	7,486
Barack Obama's Jazz	4,351
Mitt Romney Express	3,737
Mitt Romney: Silicon-Based Life-Form or Robot	3,294
Barack Obama: The People's President	3,034
Barack Obama = More War	1,096
Romney Oven Mitt	896
Mitt Romney Disgusts Me, How About You?	701
Mitt Romney is a Sociopath	633
Barack Obama Quotes	139



The dates of the screenshots and the dates of the original post are recorded for reference. The names of the Facebook users who commented or shared the posts with the pages were blacked out to avoid a violation of privacy for the users during this study. These memes were coded nominally, with a number assigned to mean a different element within a design category (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). For categories with small numbers, the coding scheme was changed to 1 representing the presence of the element and 0 for no presence of the element, after the coders conducted a test of the sample for intercoder reliability. Crosstabs revealed the frequency of each category per candidate (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Because this study was conducted one year after the election, only Facebook pages with timelines that extend back to October of 2012, and included posts between the dates of October 28 to November 3, 2012, were selected during the search. All other Facebook pages were discarded and not used for data. Post-election pages and memes were not included in this study. The author acknowledges that memes along with Facebook pages were likely deleted after the election so by retroactively collecting data, the study will only be able to tell what is currently present for 2012 election pages online, and cannot possibly conclude what the data might have looked like during the election year.

As part of the content analysis of these memes, two coders were trained for one day with the codebook found in Appendix B on page 78 (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Once coders understood the coding scheme and definitions they separated and coded the sample. After the first round of coding, the coders meet and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the codebook and coding scheme. Changes were then made to the codebook and coding scheme. The coders were retrained for one day in the new categories added to the codebook, and the coders separated for the next round of coding. The website [dfreelon.org/utills/recalfront/](http://dfreelon.org/utills/recalfront/) was used to calculate Scott's  $\pi$  for each of the categories used in appendix B on page 78. Scott's  $\pi$  is an

index correcting for the number of categories used and the predicted frequency of use of those variables (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Below is a table providing the Scott's  $\pi$  calculation for each of the variables categorized in Appendix B on page 78.

Table 2.

*The Scott's  $\pi$  score for each of the categories defined in the Appendix B on page 78 used in this study.*

Category	Scott's Pi
Text: Defined as font used.	.842
Lettering: Defined as the use of capital and lowercase letters.	.834
Font Color: Defined as the color of the fonts most commonly used.	.877
Photo Manipulation: The changing of a photograph to depict a new image or idea.	.772
Meta Meme: Memes making references to other memes.	.792
Popular Culture: The use of books, video games, movies, music, or television references.	.946
Incongruity: The juxtaposition of two visual or verbal elements not normally seen or heard together.	.775
Offensive Words: Categories based on the works of Kaye and Sapolsky (2004), words not	.792

approved for use by the FCC or viewed as inappropriate to use in public spaces.	
Romney Media Framing: The use of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames by Grabe and Bucy (2009).	.790
Obama Media Framing: The use of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames by Grabe and Bucy (2009).	.730
Pro-Anti Group Names: The positive or negative messages found in the Facebook page names for each candidate (Limeros et al., 2010)	.870

## Results

This study found that of the 16 Facebook pages sampled, which yielded 69 memes, Pro-Obama pages yielded 27 memes (39.1%), and Anti-Romney pages yielded 24 memes (34.8%), with an even split of 9 memes each for the Pro-Romney (13%), and Anti-Obama (13%) pages.

**Hypothesis 1-Identifying Memes by Party Based on Design Elements** Based on the literature reviewed the popular culture definition of a meme is online activity that shares common design elements or quantifiable characteristics, such as font and syntax (Decker-Muarere, 2012; Dia da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Miltner, 2012; Shifman, 2014; Shifman, 2012). Hypothesis 1 stated that political party memes could be identified based on design elements such as font, font color, and the use of lower case or upper case letters.

Of the 69 memes sampled, 37 (53.6%) featured only san serif fonts. Serif fonts followed this with 26 (37.7%) memes, and finally a mix of the two fonts was only found in 6 memes (8.7%; see Figure 1). Multicolored fonts were the most common with 26 (37.7%) of the 69 memes featuring multiple colored fonts, followed by white fonts with 23 (33.3%), and 13 (18.8%) with black font colors, and any other solid color with 7 (10.1%; see Figure 3). Miltner (2012) found that certain design features such as syntax, font, and image appealed to different people, and Shifman (2014) argued that memes could be studied based on these common design elements such as font, image, syntax, and even analytical characteristics like attempts at humor. The results show that specific fonts, like san serif, and font colors, like multicolor, are used more often than others. In this case memes can be quantified using common design elements.

A chi-square of the pro and anti-candidate Facebook page category by font types revealed no significant relationship between font type and candidate support [ $X^2(6, N=69) = 4.77, p < .573$ ]. The same is true for font color and candidate support. A chi-square of the pro and anti-candidate Facebook pages category and font color found no significant relationship between the two categories [ $X^2(9, N=69) = 8.49, p < .485$ ]. These results do not support Hypothesis 1. Democrat and Republican-leaning memes cannot be identified by the use of font or font color. Although Miltner (2012) found that different design elements appealed to different types of people, it appears that in this sample there is no way to distinguish a political party by meme design.

Most of the memes, 47 (68.1%), used a mix of capital and lowercased letters as opposed to sentences constructed with all capital letters to grab a user's attention or add emphasis to the meme's content. The anti-Romney pages posted the most memes with all capital letters with 10 (14.4%), while pro-Obama pages posted the most mixed lettered memes with 22(31.9%). Of the

69 memes sampled, 20 (29%) used only capital letters, and only 2 (2.9%) used only lowercased letters. (See Figure 2 on page 90). A chi-square of pro and anti-candidate Facebook pages and use of lettering found no significant relationship between the two categories [ $X^2(6, N=69) = 6.53, p < .367$ ].

San serif fonts were the most popular for all of the pages, but pro-Obama pages posted the most memes, 3 (4.3%), that had a mix of the serif and sans serif fonts. There appears to be a split between the Democrat-leaning pages, with anti-Romney pages posting more memes in serif fonts, 13 (18.8%), and pro-Obama pages posting more memes with san serif fonts, 16 (23.2%). Hypothesis 1 is not supported, as design elements such as font, font color, and font cases do not identify political party affiliation. There appears to be a universe meme design that both political parties use, and it appears that the individuals running the Facebook pages make choices based on what they think looks best, which explains the split in font type between pro-Obama and anti-Romney pages. However, without survey data on the Facebook page administrators, it would be difficult to determine which design elements appealed most to them and why they chose to post one meme over another.

**Hypothesis 2- Traditional Media Frames** The Grabe and Bucy (2009) traditional media frames of ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser were used in memes posted to political Facebook pages during the 2012 Presidential election. The ideal candidate frame was present in 36 (52.2%), the populist campaigner frame was used in 46 (66.7%), and the sure loser frame was present in 52 (75.4%) of the 69 memes sampled. As expected the majority of pro-Obama pages posted 18 (26.1%) ideal candidate image memes, with anti-Romney pages having 9 (13%) Obama memes as ideal candidate as well. However, the majority of anti-Romney depicted Romney as populist campaigner (23 or 33.3%) rather than a sure loser (17 or 24.6%). This

percentage of the populist campaigner frame was higher than on any other pro or anti-candidate Facebook pages. The sure loser frame was used most frequently (7 or 10.1%) on other pro or anti-candidate Facebook pages. However, the number of sure loser frames (17 or 24.6%) to populist campaigner frames (23 or 33.3%) was very low when compared on the anti-Romney pages. Because the majority of Romney photographs posted during the campaign focused on the populist campaigner frame (Goodnow, 2013) that is the image of Romney most available for users to manipulate into a meme and repost. However, as later discussed in this thesis, Romney's image was also had the most incongruities, so it is possible that Internet users are creating a new "un-populist" campaigner or "liar" frame.

A chi-square of the ideal candidate frame by pro and anti-candidate pages was not significant [ $X^2(3, N=69) = 4.6, p < .204$ ], with the ideal candidate frame appearing more frequently than expected on pro-Obama Facebook pages. The chi-square for the populist campaigner frame by the pro-and anti-candidate pages, was significant [ $X^2(3, N=69) = 20.66, p < .000$ ] with the populist campaigner frame appearing more frequently than expected on anti-Romney Facebook pages. The chi-square for the sure loser frame by pro-and anti-candidate pages was not significant [ $X^2(3, N=69) = 5.19, p < .158$ ]. Hypothesis 2 was not supported by all the results. All three of the frames created by Grabe and Bucy (2009) were found in the study, but unlike Goodnow (2013) the results found that memes using those frames were posted in unexpected places. For example the anti-Romney pages posted frames featuring the populist campaigner, rather than the sure loser frame.

**Hypothesis 3-Benign-Violation in Political Memes** Hypothesis 3 will require a two-part analysis. First, the categories of photographic manipulation and incongruities were created to measure the changes users made to the frames of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and

sure loser (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Hypothesis 3 states that the memes in this sample can be analyzed using the three criteria of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), where violation is considered benign and therefore funny if 1) an alternative norm exists, 2) there is a loose connection between the violation and the observer, and 3) if there is a psychological or physical distance between the violation and the observer.

Of the 69 memes sampled, most (37 or 53.6%) were categorized as photo collages because they featured too many manipulated images to fit into one category. Nine (13%) featured a manipulation to the background of an image, 4 (5.8%) featured an additional character that was not in the original photograph, and 3 (4.3%) featured the manipulation to the candidate's face or body. Only 16 (23.3%) of the total 69 memes featured no photographic manipulation of any kind. A chi-square of the Mitt Romney's image for type of photographic manipulation by political party revealed no significant relationship [ $X^2(12, N=69) = 14.88, p < .248$ ]. However, a chi-square of President Barack Obama's image by political party and photographic manipulation was significant [ $X^2(9, N=69) = 36.12, p < .000$ ], with more Obama memes coding for ideal candidate and photographic manipulation than originally expected.

The category of incongruity was broken into three subcategories; a text incongruity was a meme that featured an incongruous statement superimposed on a photograph. A photo incongruity was a meme that featured an incongruity added to the photograph, and finally memes without incongruities were labeled. Most of the memes, 32 (46.6%) of the 69 memes, did not feature an incongruity. Text incongruities were most common with 19 (27.5%) of the 69 memes gathered featuring a funny or awkward saying above the image used. Photographic incongruities were not far behind with 18 (26.1%) of the 69 memes in the sample featuring an incongruous photo manipulation. A chi-square of Romney's image by the category of incongruity [ $X^2(6,$

$N=69$ ) = 15.6,  $< .016$ ] was significant, but Obama's image by incongruity [ $X^2(6, N=69) = 4.14$ ,  $p < .656$ ] was not significant. This means that Obama's image was manipulated a lot, but in more flattering ways, with almost no incongruity between the changing of the image and the original meaning of the image. However, Romney's image was almost always changed to create an incongruity (see Image 1 on page 33).

The three criteria of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) which are, 1) the presence of an alternative norm suggests a situation is acceptable, 2) a weak commitment to the violated norm, and 3) a psychological distance from the violation, were used as an analytical tool to examine the incongruities found in the memes. However, an interesting pattern did emerge with the Romney populist campaigner memes. Obama was frequently coded as an idea candidate (18 or 26.1%), and Romney as a populist campaigner (23 or 33.3%) as expected based on the Goodnow (2013) study of the candidate Facebook pages. However, the majority of Romney's populist memes were also coded for either a text (4 or 5.8%) or photo (4 or 5.8%) incongruity. In the example below, the incongruities are contained within the photograph, with campaign signs changed to a negative message compared to the rustic background and image of Romney as a populist campaigner (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).



Image 1 Mitt Romney Sucks--Facebook Page



Mitt Romney Sucks (posted October 28, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-10-58-27

**Image 1.** This meme was coded as including a photographic incongruity because the photo has been manipulated to add signs to the photograph of Mitt Romney. In this image Romney also appears as the populist campaigner (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) because he is in informal clothing posing at a farm with the American flag in the background.

Image 1 is an example of a benign-violation (McGraw & Warren, 2010) because it meets the three criteria by first suggesting that something is wrong; a politician would proudly stand in front of a sign saying bullshit, but the violation is not beyond the realm of the given public belief that politicians are liars. The group posting the meme is called “Mitt Romney Sucks,” so clearly the user posting the meme as well as the users liking and sharing the meme are weakly committed to the violated norm, (McGraw & Warren, 2010), in other words they are likely not members of the Republican Party or supporters of Mitt Romney as a candidate. The meme also creates a psychological distance for the users because Mitt Romney, although a well-known person, is not a direct relation or friend of the users on this page. Because the incongruity

is within the photograph itself, this meme was coded as having a photographic incongruity. It appears, at least in this sample, that Romney's attempts to appeal to a more rustic or rural audience turned into an opportunity for the users of anti-Romney Facebook pages to connect Romney with the cultural ideals associated with the word and image of rednecks, hicks, or other negative stereotypes. So the question for future research is: although there are traces of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser (Grabe & Bucy, 2009), are the incongruities added creating new frames like the "un-populist campaigner," "the questionable credibility," or in the case of most of Obama's negative images the "tyrannical or criminal president" frame? In this sample, hypothesis 3 is supported. The three criteria of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) could be used as an analytical tool for understanding the popularity of memes and where they are spread, but more studies are needed to find to what extent the users are aware of these criteria in their own decision-making for sharing memes across social media platforms.

### **Limitations**

In the future, researchers should gather a larger sample of memes than the 69 memes gathered for this study. A larger sample size across several social media platforms would allow researchers the opportunity to watch as memes form, spread, and disappear during an election cycle. It would also be useful to compare Facebook to other social media websites that allow anonymity. Because Facebook displays the user's full name with the content the user interacts with and then sends updates to friends and family, it is possible that Facebook users shy-away or avoid contact with highly offensive memes. It is also a concern that this study was done retroactively, and most of the offensive content could have been reported and taken down long before the study began one year after the election.

The use of a convince sample also presented a problem with gathering data. There were significantly more Democratic-leaning pages in the sample than Republican-leaning pages. This could be a result of searching for data after the election, and the loss could have resulted in Republicans deleting their pages. This slant of the sample to a Democratic view also effected the results of this study, because one can presume that users who planned to vote for the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, created the pro-Obama and anti-Romney pages. This finding is similar to the findings of Limperos et al. (2010), in which most of the highest activity on Facebook in the 2008 election was among positive Obama pages, or Democratic pages. Because the sample of posts gathered were made during the last full week before the election, it is possible that the activities of more Republican-leaning pages dropped off, or the activities of the more Democrat-leaning pages picked-up to persuade voters in the last days before the election.

With such a small sample it is difficult to say that there is or is not a partisan divide among design elements because it cannot demonstrate a statistically significant test. However in this small sample there does not appear to be a divide. Future studies should gather memes across social media websites during an election cycle to see if there is not only a divide among parties, but a different design that is dominate for each social media website. Shifman's (2014) definition of a meme appears to fit this study, even the political memes posted to Facebook during the 2012 election share a common set of characteristics for font use that are quantifiable, and can be used in future studies to understand what users look for to identify a meme.

In most cases, the pro-anti candidate groups would only post memes with photographs of the candidate whose name was also a part of the group name. Anti-Romney and pro-Romney groups posted fewer memes with photographs of Obama, and anti-Obama and pro-Obama groups posted fewer memes with photographs of Romney. Again, in this sample the Democrat-

leaning pages posted the most memes in the last week of the election, and the small sample only reflects what was available for those pages one year after the 2012 presidential election had occurred.

In future, it would be better to redefine categories of political framing for user-based content by deciding which candidate in the photograph is viewed by the users as the dominate figure or the ultimate subject of the meme. So much of the sample featured photographically manipulated images, or photo collages, it was hard for coders to decide which candidate was the main subject of the meme. With memes featuring multiple photographs of Obama, Romney, and Chris Christie, the coders decided to opt for the name of the candidate page as a cue for who the dominate figure in the photograph was, rather than code each candidate individually for the political frames of ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

It is also important to note that the Scott's *pi* scores for this study are below .80, which is a standard used most often for content analysis. The coders had difficulty identifying not only the subject of multiple candidate memes, but also some of the finer photographic manipulations and incongruities. In future studies it is important to fully define each category and train coders to see photo manipulation, or use Photoshop detecting software to analyze the photographs used in the memes.

## **Discussion**

Based on past scholarship (Decker-Muarere, 2012; Dia da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Miltner, 2012; Shifman, 2014; Shifman, 2012) memes can be easily identified by a quantifiable set of characteristics that include use of humor, syntax, font, and font color. Shifman (2014) argued that these characteristics could be measured and used to further

research into the use and production of memes online. In the literature review, this study argued that there are two different definitions of memes, a traditional definition (Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1976) that views memes as evolving, traceable cultural artifacts such as fashion, religion, or tool making. The second definition is a popular culture definition of memes as user-made media surfacing online in social media forums (Decker-Muarere, 2012; Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Miltner, 2012; Shifman, 2014; Shifman, 2012). The findings in this study are meant to further advance the popular culture definition. Memes were defined as user-generated content in the form of a .GIF (an image or video clip that moves in a short loop), image macro (a photo with text superimposed on the top and bottom of it) or video, such as a YouTube video or Vine, that has been manipulated from the original material or created to express a particular thought or ideology about the subject matter contained in the .GIF, image macro or video.

**Hypothesis 1** Decker-Maurere (2012) argued that different characteristics of memes appealed to different groups of people. Thelwall and Shifman (2009) also found that memes would find a way to adapt to fit the cultural needs of online groups. They found that a joke about technology and relationships changed to fit the language that was more culturally recognized, for example in America the joke referenced baseball, but in India the same joke referenced Cricket. Hypothesis 1 stated that memes would be easily identified by political party based on common design characteristics such as font or lettering type used, like all capitalization or lowercase letters. The results of this study did not support hypothesis 1. The general trend found in the sample of 69 memes were; 37(53.6%) of the 69 memes used sans serif fonts, 26 (37.7%) of the 69 memes used multicolored fonts using different colors to emphasize words or phrases, and 47(68.1%) of the 69 memes used mixed lettering of capitals and lowercase letters to write

messages above and below photographs in image macro-style memes. However, the small convenience sample gathered one year after the election contained more Democratic-leaning memes. So the results of this study may be evidence of design trends in Democratic-leaning memes in general. In future studies, a larger sample of memes gathered across social media platforms during an ongoing election would yield more accurate results. Despite the small sample there was an interesting design trend that did emerge. Some of the Facebook pages developed their own unique art style.

**Art Style** Two of the pages developed an art style that became apparent through coding the meme sample. Those pages were “Barack Obama’s Jazz” and “Mitt Romney is a Silicon-Based Life-Form or Robot.” It appears that the purpose of the “Barack Obama’s Jazz” page was to take photographs of President Obama and then re-create Blue Note record albums with those photographs. These memes are an incongruity because the manipulation of President Obama into a jazz musician is at odds with the work of a president or the ideal candidate framing (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) identified most in photographs of President Obama in the 2012 Presidential election (Goodnow, 2013). The creator of these memes was very skilled with photo manipulation software, such as Adobe Photoshop. The memes all feature images of the Obama as the ideal candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009), but were changed to make him less Presidential and more like a jazz artists who recorded at Blue Note Records during the 1950s and 1960s. The splicing of photographs together violates the image, and the artistic nature of the memes compared to the original news photographic content is also an incongruity. Basically, the creator wants the users to associate President Obama with being cool, like Miles Davis or John Coltrane. This set of memes was part of a small group that featured references to other popular culture icons. Only 11(15.8%) of the 69 memes featured a reference to popular culture such as music, movies,

television, or video games. This could also be the development of a new frame by the user, a “pop culture icon” frame that mixes the president’s image with classic or important popular culture icons to lend him some credibility.

*Image 2 Barack Obama’s Jazz--Facebook Page*



Barack Obama’s Jazz (posted November 2, 2012)

Image: 2013-12-12-11-28-26

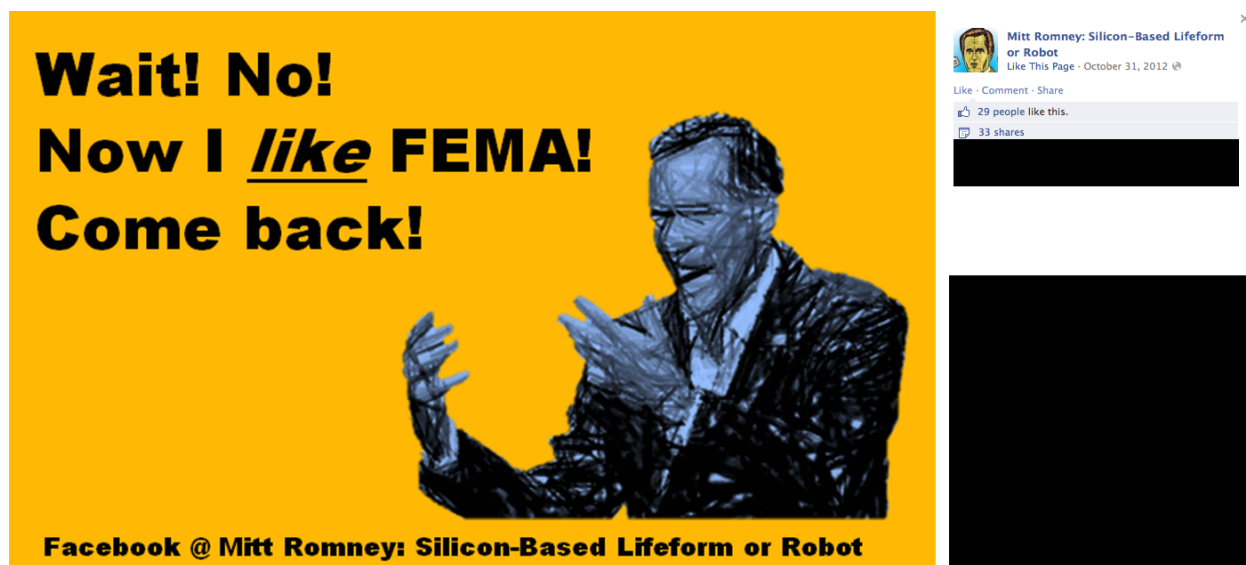
**Image 2.** The Facebook page Barack Obama’s Jazz was dedicated to memes that linked photographs of Obama to Blue Note Jazz records. The administrator of this page was clearly a skilled designer with knowledge of jazz record history. In image 2, Obama is coded as ideal candidate (Grabe & Bucy) because he is in formal attire.

The next art style that appears is from the page “Mitt Romney is a Silicon-Based Life-Form or Robot.” This art style is interesting because it involves the scratching-out of politicians and placing them on a blank colored background with a quote. It is likely that these images are done by the same user, possibly the administrator of the page, and posted to the page to be circulated on Facebook. These memes had a photo incongruity, because the image was blurred out or changed from what would normally be viewed during a political campaign. This art style made coding difficult because the images of each of the candidates were blurred and scratchy.

The chaotic nature of the politicians compared to the stagnate background draws the eye to the candidate’s image and allows the candidate to stand alone with his quote illustrating the positions of the candidates, or the positions of the meme maker, without distraction from the background of the image giving viewers more context clues about the image and quote. The scribbles and minimalist nature of the memes violate the images. However, the violation is benign because the image is not rooted in a reality, but instead these scribble politicians exist in some sort of void where they are left with the meme’s message. Once again, the memes have developed a way to change the traditional media framing of the candidates to add political commentary to the Facebook page. Although Romney is only a shadow in the meme below, he appears to be wearing ordinary clothing, so that could fit him into the populist campaigner category (Grabe & Bucy, 2009), however, we cannot see his face and the text and body language indicate something more along the lines of the sure loser frame (Grabe & Bucy, 2009), or possibly a new frame “the faceless politician” fame, that tries to disassociate physical characteristics from a candidate and emphasize political stances or speeches.



*Image 3 Mitt Romney: Silicon-Based Life-Form or Robot--Facebook Page*



Mitt Romney: Silicon-Based Life-Form or Robot (posted October 31, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-11-01-53

**Image 3.** In the above image, Romney is left alone with a quote. The Facebook page has signed the meme. This means the administrator of this page must be making these memes, and worries that the meme could be copy/pasted as original content somewhere else.

**Hypothesis 2** This study also used the media framing codebook developed by Grabe and Bucy (2009), which found that candidates could be coded as fitting into three categories by examining television and newspaper images, to determine if those frames could still be found in political memes. These categories are the ideal candidate, who is seen in formal clothing often talking with other elected officials, the populist campaigner, who is seen in informal clothing often with large supportive crowds or celebrities, and the sure loser, who is seen as acting or dressing inappropriately for the environment in which he or she is photographed (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Hypothesis 2 stated that users would continue to frame candidates with the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Goodnow (2013) found that Barack Obama's candidate Facebook page used the ideal candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) frame most often, showing President Obama in the oval office, with a large entourage, or

talking with other political leaders. She also found that Mitt Romney used the populist campaigner (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) frame most often on his candidate Facebook page, with images of Romney in plain clothing posing on farms, in factories, or with common people (Goodnow, 2013).

Hypothesis 2 was supported, there were traces of all three frames. Users appear to work within the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, or sure loser (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) to make a comment about the candidates, however some of the photo manipulation is so extreme coding for these categories was very difficult and could indicate a whole new digital media frame. Just as the Goodnow (2013) study found, most of Romney's images appear to fit the populist campaigner frame and most of Obama's images appear to fit the ideal candidate frame. Although the candidates were coded individually, of all the 69 memes the ideal candidate frame appeared in 36 (52.5%), the populist campaigner in 46 (66.7%), and the sure loser in 52 (75.4%) of the memes after frequencies of each frame was run for every candidate coded in a meme. Pro-Obama pages had the most instances of the ideal candidate with 18(26.1%) of the 69 memes. Mitt Romney, however, was most often coded as the populist campaigner for both pro-Romney and anti-Romney pages, with 16(23.2%) of the 69 memes in the sample. These results support the findings of Goodnow (2013), and suggest that users are gathering images for memes from what is available through social media and the press. If Mitt Romney was only shown as the populist campaigner in news media and his campaign, then the memes reflect that those were the images most circulated through memes on Facebook in 2012. There was a third candidate that appeared in the memes sample. Several memes feature New Jersey Governor Chris Christie.

**Chris Christie, The Other Candidate** Because Chris Christie was the governor of New Jersey during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and at that time he worked closely with President Obama to

secure aid for the state, most of the memes with Christie in them also have Obama near. In fact, the most liked, shared, and commented meme in the sample was a picture of Obama and Christie together after Hurricane Sandy, and it is featured below as an example. President Obama is pulling conservative support from the photographs with Christie, and the reverse is true of Christie pulling political clout from President Obama. This could also be a new frame emerging from the meme-verse, a “we’re all American,” or “no more parties” frame that brings both political parties together, and appears to only have surfaced as a result of a national tragedy.

*Image 4 One Million Strong Defeated Mitt Romney 2012-Facebook Page*



One Million Strong Defeated Mitt Romney 2012 (posted November 1, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-11-09-48

**Image 4.** Image 4 had the most likes, shares, and comments of all the memes in the sample. It is clear that Hurricane Sandy was an important issue toward the end of the campaign. In this meme, Obama is portrayed as a populist campaigner (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) because he is in informal dress and interacting with and embracing average voters.

In the example, Christie and Obama are friendly and the text suggest that conservative movements like the Tea Party or Birthers are why the country is divided, not Republicans like Christie. These “friendly” memes of Christie appeared only on anti-Romney pages. Pro-Obama pages did not post any memes of the president with Christie during the final week before the election in the pages selected. This is perhaps an indication of Republicans that were angry about Mitt Romney’s nomination, but not entirely ready to give up on other candidates within the Republican Party. In future studies it would be interesting to note if these users are angry Republicans, or if they are Democrats using Christie to lend political credit to Obama and pull on-the-fence Republican votes to President Obama. Christie was also featured in one of the three meta-memes collected in the sample, meaning memes that made references to other existing memes on the Internet. He was added to Bad Luck Brian, who attempts to do something right, but it always turns out wrong. Most of the “friendly” memes featuring Christie and Obama do not have an incongruity. The users appear to agree with or use the same media framing that already existed in the photographs, only adding some commentary or phrases like the previous example. It is only when Christie is alone in the meme that a text or photographic incongruity appears, like the meta-meme example below.

In this meme, Christie’s face replaces Bad Luck Brian’s face. The incongruity that occurs between the sizes of the Christie face and the smaller adolescent body of Brian is a physical violation of human proportions, and a social violation of how users normally see Christie framed in the media. There is also a violation within the text indicating that Christie is doing the right thing for his state by working with President Obama, but is now garnering criticism from his party as a result. The meme is difficult to code according to the Grabe and Bucy (2009) categories. Is Christie now a populist campaigner because he is in informal dress and the text is

celebrating his work for the people, or is Christie's presence in the meme an entirely new category that should be considered when analyzing candidate framing in new media? Perhaps another example of the "pop culture icon" frame or some other meta-meme frame.

*Image 5 Mitt Romney: Silicon-Based Life-Form or Robot--Facebook Page*



Mitt Romney: Silicon-Based Life-Form or Robot (posted November 2, 2012  
Image 2013-12-12-11-03-18

**Image 5.** The meme above was coded as a meta-meme because it references the Bad Luck Brian meme, where Brian tries to do something good, but instead something bad or awkward happens. Again, the meme appears to support Christie by saying he is doing something good, but that his party criticizes him for his decision. It is possible that Republicans that were unhappy with Romney, but not every politician in the party ran these anti-Romney pages.

These examples within the sample indicate that users are in fact playing with the traditional media frames that Grabe and Bucy (2009) found, and are aware of the media frames they are using to add commentary to campaign coverage. Future studies should not only gather

more memes to yield a statistical test of this hypothesis, but should also examine if internet users have started to contribute new media frames, that may not be visually flattering, but are made with the intentions of gathering support for a candidate or cause.

**Hypothesis 3** Past studies have found that memes focus greatly on humor to infect users (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Shifman, 2012). Blackmore (1999) argued in her book, *the Meme Machine* that memes could use things like humor as a vehicle to access more users to spread. Past studies have focused on classical humor theories such as superiority (Shifman, 2012) or memes as satire (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2012). Hypothesis 3 stated that the three criteria of the benign-violation theory developed by McGraw and Warren (2010) could be applied to memes as an analytical tool to understand why the meme was posted on the Facebook group and why it was successful.

The three criteria of benign-violation theory are; 1) an alternative norm suggests that the violation is acceptable, 2) the viewers are loosely connected to the violated norm, and 3) there is a psychological and physical distance from the violated norm (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Hypothesis 3 was supported by the results of this study. Just as the example used on page 37 in the results section, the three criteria can be applied to analyze a meme. For example, in the meme below the image of President Obama has been violated to create a meme. In this meme President Obama looks sad and is holding a sign in front of what appears to be a criminal line-up found in police stations. The sign reads “coward-in-chief, 4 counts, murder, Sept. 11, 2012.” If the three criteria of benign-violation theory are applied to this meme we find that 1) the alternative norm that politicians are sometimes criminals says the violated norm of disrespecting a President are considered okay by society, 2) the meme was posted by the Facebook group “Conservatives Against Obama’s Liberal Agenda”, and then shared by the Facebook group “Mitt

Romney Express,” meaning that none of the group members viewing the meme have a close connection to President Obama or his politics and party, and finally 3) there is a psychological and physical distance between the viewers and the meme. Obama is set at a medium frame in the photograph, so the viewers are not up-close to the subject of the photograph. Also, because this image is not happening in real-time in front of the users there are physical and psychological distances. This could also be yet another political frame created by the Facebook users, the “criminal president” frame, where users compare sitting presidents to other immoral or criminal behavior from other presidents, like Nixon, or simply make up criminal charges.

*Image 6 Mitt Romney Express*



Mitt Romney Express (posted October 28, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-10-50-31

**Image 6.** The meme above was coded as having a photographic incongruity because the hands and background were added to the photograph and are incongruity to the image of a President.

The meme is an example of humor posted to Facebook groups that share a common interest in defeating President Obama in the 2012 Presidential election.

Memes with the most violations were the populist campaigner (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) images of Mitt Romney posted to 2012 Presidential Election Facebook pages. In the example below, Romney is accused by the text of writing off his charitable donation for a tax credit. Again, Hurricane Sandy surfaced as the most important issue during the last week of the 2012 Presidential election. Most of the images featuring President Obama also feature Governor Chris Christie and are of a serious nature, but images of Mitt Romney are used to make a joke out of his populist campaigner frame (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Again, this could be evidence of an “un-populist campaigner” frame used by the Facebook meme-creators to repurpose the abundant images of Mitt Romney as the populist campaigner (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

The violations are benign because, an alternative norm of rich people or corporations donating to charity for the tax break exists, the users viewing the meme are members of a page called “Mitt Romney Sucks,” and therefore have a weak connection to the Republican Party or campaign, and finally, apart from the text, no physically strange manipulations have happened to Mitt Romney. He stands in almost full frame away from the camera creating distance between himself and the viewers. It is also likely that the users “sharing” or “liking” the meme do not have a close tie to anyone who is a Republican, so they are not worried about offending their Facebook friends by posting the image.



Image 7 Mitt Romney Sucks



Mitt Romney Sucks (posted November 1, 2012  
Image 2013-12-12-10-55-19

**Image 7.** The meme above was coded as having text incongruity because the words are at odds with the message of the image. In the image, Romney shakes the hand of a donor at a canned food drive presumably for the victims of Hurricane Sandy, however the text superimposed on the image implies that Romney is using the drive as a form of self-promotion and a way to save money.

The meme above was posed to the Facebook group “Mitt Romney Sucks,” suggesting that the group and its users have no connection to Mitt Romney, his party, or his campaign. The image is shot from a distance and made smaller by the large text emphasizing the message of the meme. This creates a physical distance from the image used in the meme, however it can not be measured without the use of survey data if the creator of the meme has a physical or psychological distance from both Hurricane Sandy and the campaign event. The idea that a candidate would use a tragedy for promotion during a tough election is not beyond the realm of popular beliefs about politics, so a salient norm is suggesting that this violation of the image is benign (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Future studies should further define incongruities to test the use of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

**Duplicated Samples** In the meme sample there were two sets of memes that were shared on different pages. The first example is the Bill Maher meme, with both posts featured below. The image appears to have a digital signature on it from [facebook.com/politicalhumor](https://www.facebook.com/politicalhumor). The anti-Romney page posted the meme as original content, whereas the pro-Obama page shared the meme from [Moveon.org](https://www.moveon.org)'s Facebook page.

*Image 8 One Million Strong Defeated Mitt Romney in 2012--Facebook Page*



One Million Strong Defeated Mitt Romney (posted October 31, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-11-04-18

**Image 8.** Image 8 is the second time this meme appeared in the sample. It is a duplicate of Image 4 above. However, the Facebook group, One Million Strong Defeated Mitt Romney in 2012, chose to copy/paste this meme as original content, rather than share, as in Image 4.

*Image 9 Barack Obama: The People's President--Facebook Page*



Barack Obama: The People's President (posted October 31, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-11-45-03

**Image 9.** This meme was captured twice in the sample, but the shared meme from MoveOn.org had the most shares, likes, and comments. The meme is a reference to Bill Maher's television show. A Google image search revealed that the headshot of Bill Maher is used a lot in memes featuring quotes of his. This meme was coded as anti-Romney because the quote suggests that Romney is dishonest.

To understand where the image might have originally emerged, it was uploaded into the Google image search function on Google's home page. The results on the first page were of the stock photo used in this image of Bill Maher from his website and Wikipedia searches. However, under the images tab Google found more memes of Bill Maher with the same photograph and red background, but with different quotes from his show. So it appears that this is in fact a genre of meme or a meta-meme that was posted or shared by Facebook groups with similar ideologies, pro-Obama and anti-Romney. This meme was coded as a popular culture reference to television, because Bill Maher has a show on HBO. The reference to Halloween works as a time capsule because the memes gathered in this study were posted during the week of October when the holiday fell in 2012. The next duplicated meme also features a time reference to the fall day light savings time change.

Both "Mitt Romney Express" and "Mitt Romney Central" shared this meme as an original post, so again a Google image search was used to find where this meme might have originated. After looking through 5 pages of search results of the presidential seal a forum with the exact image beside the search result turned-up. The forum is called Freerepublic.com and the image is posted as a comment to the results of a presidential poll, however there is still no way to trace if this image was an original work posted to this forum or if the user happens to frequent both Facebook and this website. The meme reminds users to not only change their clocks, but to vote on Election Day. The real visual oddity is the bald man drinking a beer at the bottom of the meme. It is not clear if this is an artist signature or possibly a television reference to Walter

White in *Breaking Bad*. And although the meme is interesting, and appears twice in the sample, there is no way to trace the origins of this visual content. Future studies could use a similar method of looking for meme origins or ask users if they post things from more ideological websites, like this [Freerepublic.com](http://Freerepublic.com), to more mainstream social media websites, like Facebook using a self-filter of images that are still ideologically strong, but less offensive to friends, family, and co-workers that can easily identify Facebook users by their profile names.

*Image 10 Mitt Romney Central--Facebook Page*



Mitt Romney Central (posted November 3, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-10-59-36

**Image 10.** Mitt Romney Central posted image 9 as original content. The meme reminds voters to turn back their clocks and vote within the same week. It is not clear whom the bald man at the bottom of the image represents.

Image 11 Mitt Romney Express--Facebook



Mitt Romney Express (posted November 3, 2012)  
Image 2013-12-12-10-53-35

**Image 11.** Image 10 was also posted as original content. Because the meme was posted as original content twice it is difficult to determine an origin for the meme. A Google image search brought the researcher to a conservative forum online, but there the image was also posted as original content. It is not clear who the bald man represents, or if he is a reference to the popular television show *Breaking Bad* because of his resemblance to the character of Walter White.

### Conclusion

The results of this study found that hypothesis 1 stating that Democrat and Republican memes could be easily identified by common design elements was not supported. Memes could not be used to identify political party based on common design characteristics. Perhaps meme design transcends party affiliation, and is symbolic of an online meme language accessed by many different types of people to get ideas across in a simple and memorable way. The sample did yield a higher number of Democratic-leaning memes than Republican-leaning memes, so the results may not be universal, but the differences between the Democratic-leaning memes lead the researcher to believe that there are no differences in design elements based on political party.

Memes appear to have a common design despite political opinion. This could be an indication of a greater evolution in communication at work on social networks. If memes do not differ by party, then as Decker-Muarere (2012), Miltner (2012), and Shifman (2014) argue there is a common meme language that can be quantified to understand how users are communicating both verbally, visually, and audibly online. This would mean that future studies could explore the exact fonts, font colors, lettering, and syntax used in meme-making to categorize and eventually imitate and replicate popular memes. The results of these studies could change the way advertisers, both political and commercial, speak to users on social media websites. It would also help scholars understand how online grassroots movements develop, communicate, and eventually move to action in the physical world.

The results supported hypothesis 2, stating that the frames found by Grabe and Bucy (2009) would continue to be used in memes created for social media. Internet users are still using the traditional media frames, like the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser frames to create memes (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). However, the manipulation of these images appear to also create new frames emerging from memes posted to Facebook during the 2012 Presidential election. Users appear to take the available media photographs of candidates to use for their own purposes. Users are taking the existing media frames of Grabe and Bucy (2009) and adding text or photographic elements to create commentary and participate in the political campaign.

The majority of the memes posted to the political Facebook pages in 2012 took campaign materials and news photographs to create the memes and post them for shares, likes, and comments on Facebook. Some of the more manipulated images were the most popular on these Facebook pages. The question this study did not ask, but deserves future attention, is how much of the commentary added to the photographs is original and how much of it is an echo of

traditional news coverage and opinion. This study found that Mitt Romney was framed most as the populist campaigner (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). This is in line with the results of Goodnow's (2013) study of the official campaign Facebook pages. However, the populist campaigner memes were manipulated with text and photographic elements to add negative commentary to the media frame (Grab & Bucy, 2009) creating an "un-populist campaigner" frame. This would indicate that users are aware of these common media frames, and either consciously or unconsciously, they are reacting against the message sent in the media frame. Future studies should also look into how aware meme-makers are of the image they are using. Do they in fact know what the image is conveying? Or are they simply finding convenient images to toss ideas out on social media websites quickly? If they are aware of the frames, then the media saturated millennial generation, which has proven difficult for Democrat and Republican campaigns to reach out to, may understand and manipulate more traditional media campaign tactics. This would make communicating on their level difficult, and could require a bit of self-deprecating humor to gain popularity in a meme-ruled media environment.

The results also support hypothesis 3, stating that the three criteria of benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010) can be used as an analytical tool. All of the photographic and text violations of the candidates in the sample are benign because there is an alternative norm suggesting the violation is acceptable, the users on the pages where the memes are posted are weakly connected to the party or candidate, and there is a psychological and physical distance between the users and the candidates (McGraw & Warren, 2010). In other words, it is not uncommon or strange to see jokes about candidates lying or participating in underhanded activities, as suggested by the memes. These could also be new frames appearing on Facebook, such as the "criminal president," "the faceless politician," and the "liar candidate" frames. The



users only posted these kinds of memes on pages making fun of the candidate in the meme, so the other Facebook users would find the meme funny and not offensive, and to the knowledge of this study, none of the users posting memes were directly related to either candidate or cause that was joked about in the memes. However, it is difficult to really determine what psychological or physical distance users need to find a meme funny, so further research using survey and observational data could better explain how users are interacting with the memes they like, share, or comment on Facebook or other social media websites. Future studies could design a better way to test and use the three criteria of benign-violation theory and memes (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

In the popular culture definition of a meme, humor plays an important role in the development and success of a meme (Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Shifman, 2014; Shifman, 2012). Past studies, however, have focused on classical definitions of humor, like Plato's superiority theory (Shifman, 2012). New humor studies are emerging that tie into the evolutionary aspect of meme studies, like the benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), which argues humor evolved as a form of threat evaluation, for example a bomb is frightening, but a bomb full of kittens is funny and adorable. And the encryption theory (Flamson and Barrett, 2008), which states that humor evolved as a way for humans to encrypt information about themselves to find like-minded individuals. These newer theories could explain more about how and why memes are created. When a user sends a meme joking about President Obama's foreign policy, is the user trying to convey a humorous, but serious message about him or herself? When is a meme offensive? According to benign-violation theory, the meme will become offensive when the joke crosses a cultural, physical, or psychological line that other users do not accept as humorous. For example, if a joke about Mitt Romney's

comments about women in the workforce suggests that rape is acceptable, users will become offended. If advertisers or campaign strategists wanted to develop memes to spread during an election it would be important to understand why humor works so well as a vehicle for memes, and especially how humor works within online communities.

Although this study provides a list of common characteristics for memes posted to Facebook in 2012, it does not explain if the memes are funny and to what degree of influence the funniness of the meme has on its lifespan. As Blackmore said memes need a vehicle to transport from person to person (Blackmore, 1999). A research question to build a future study with asks if humor is the vehicle by which online memes move themselves from user to user and website to website. The units in future study could analyze college undergraduates that identify themselves as young Republicans, Democrats, or Independents because they are the group most active on social media websites. Because past humor studies have found that psychological distance plays a role in the funniness of a joke or event (McGraw, 2012), the study will use two different treatments to examine the type of device used, and the role that online anonymity plays in passing along memes on social media websites. As digital communications become more prevalent, websites like Facebook and LinkedIn are more popular for older or more professional communications than Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter because each user of Facebook or LinkedIn has to give a legal first and last name to join, it strips the users of anonymity, whereas Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter allow users to create screen names. If users are afraid of offending friends, family, or coworkers with jokes, do they post offensive material on websites offering anonymity and not on websites with their names and photos attached?

Finally, the results of a content analysis of political memes posted during an election would be better suited for a study that would allow the researcher to collect memes from multiple

websites during a Presidential election. The sample would be very large and would vary per social media website, but would yield statistically significant numbers unlike this small convenience sample. This thesis acts as a pilot study for a number of different applications of memes in user-candidate political communications in digital media. This study found that there was a prevalent font, font color, and lettering used, and also that users violated the traditional media framing of political candidates (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) when they created and posted memes to Facebook pages during the 2012 Presidential election. The best results for a study of this kind would be to capture memes as they occur during an election to yield a higher meme sample, and to expand to the different types of memes that begin to surface across social media websites.

In the end, users are participating in political discussion online, and they use the traditional media frames of the ideal candidate, populist campaigner, and sure loser (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) as a base to build their commentary. The violations of those traditional media frames such as the ones developed by Grabe and Bucy (2009) can be explained by benign-violation theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010), which states that humor has evolved from a form of threat evaluation. However, it is unclear if users are aware of the media frames and purposely play with the original photographs, or if users are simply finding the most convenient photographs to create memes. There appears to be a universal meme design based on these results, but the sample was too small to statistically prove a significant value for those common design elements such as font, font color, and letter. If there is in fact no connection between design and political party, then the popular culture definition of memes is usable in future studies because memes cannot be identified by common features such as font, font color, lettering, syntax, and humor (Decker-Maurere, 2012; Miltner, 2012; Shifman, 2014), but there is a deeper

appeal to user groups beyond the physical design elements of a meme. Because the traditional definition of meme (Blackmore, 1999; Dawkins, 1976) is very broad, the best definition to use in future studies is the popular culture definition (Decker-Maurere, 2012; Dias da Silva & Garcia, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Miltner, 2012; Shifman, 2014; Shifman, 2012), which narrows memes to quantifiable features. Memes are an important part of digital communication in social media communities, and are therefore in need of greater study to understand how they form, how they travel, and what effects memes have on Internet user opinion and action.

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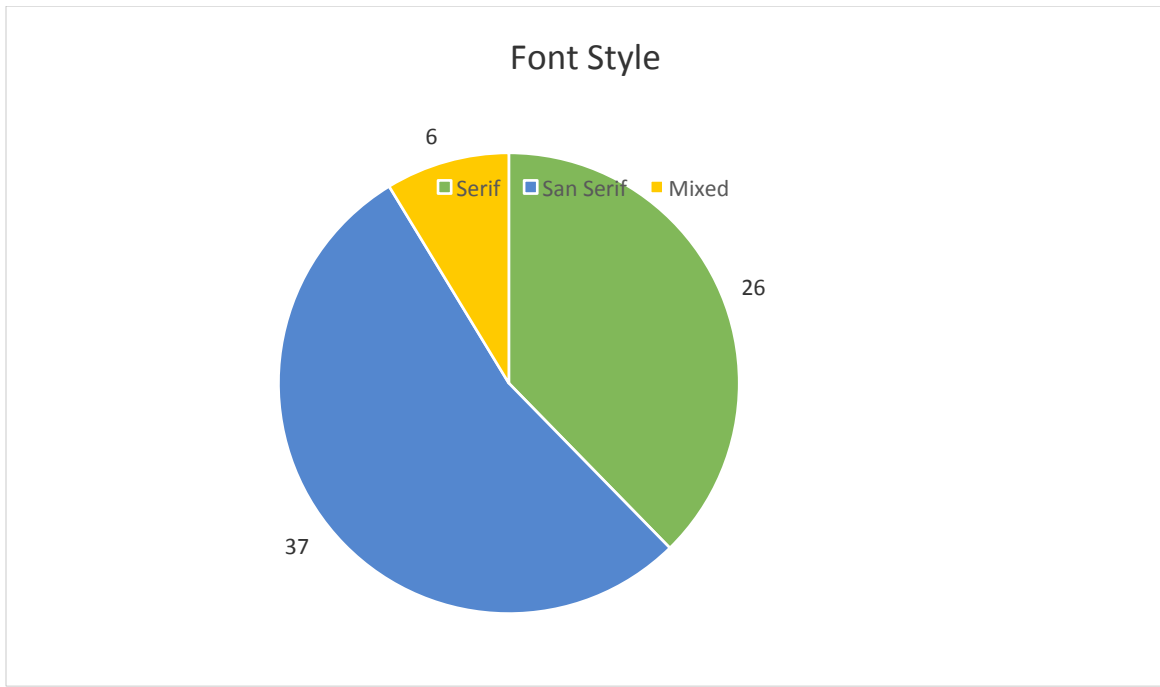


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### Appendix A

Figure 1

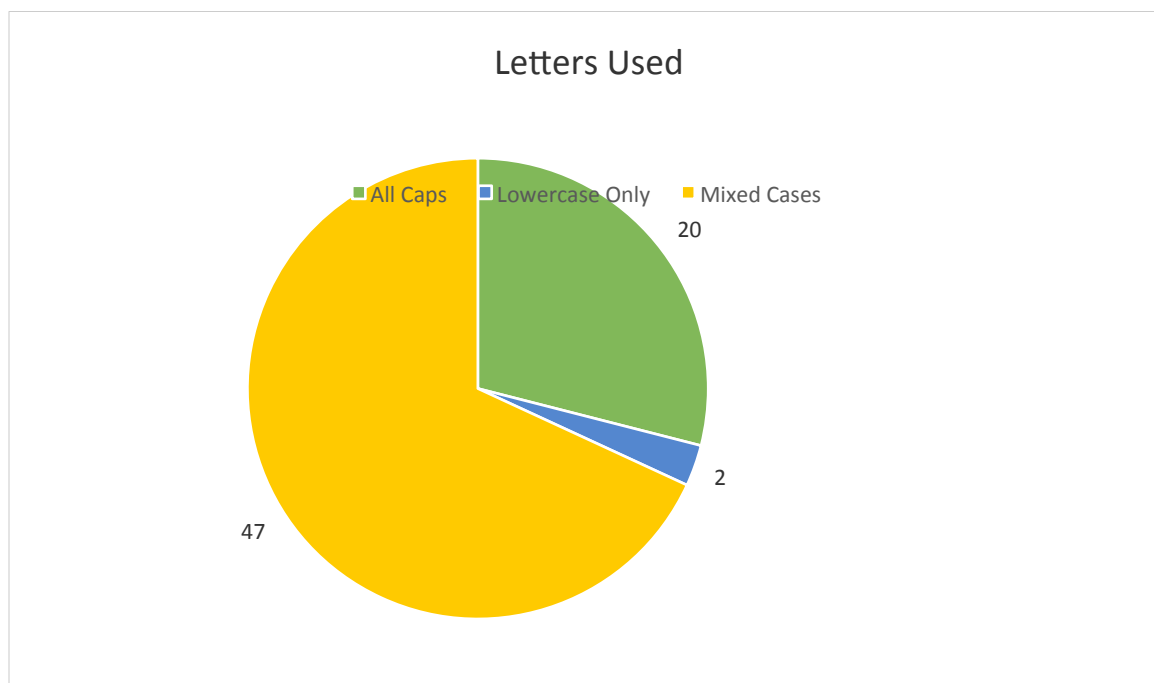
*Frequency of Fonts Used in Memes Posted to 2012 Presidential Election Facebook Pages*



*Figure 1.* Frequencies for each category were run using SPSS software to find the number of instances each font was used. Of the 69 memes gathered for the study, 37 (53.6%) memes contained san serif font, 26 (37.7%) contained serif font, and only 6 (8.7%) memes contained a mix of the two fonts.

Figure 2

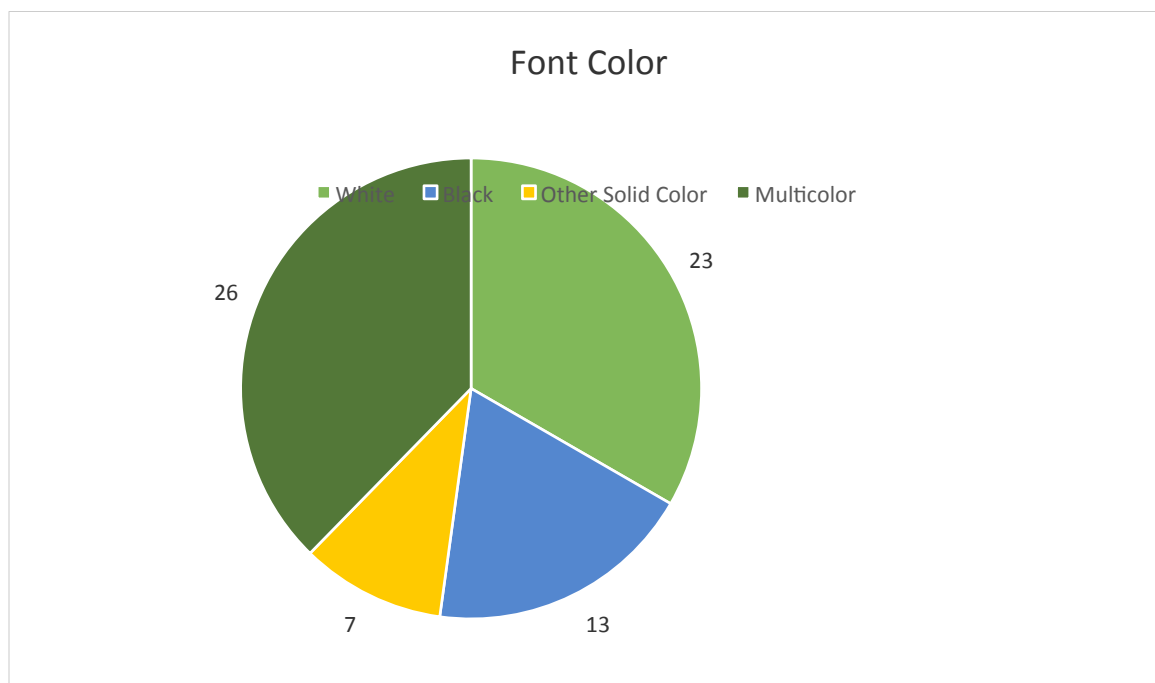
*Frequency of Letter Cases Used by Memes Posted to 2012 Presidential Facebook Pages*



*Figure 2.* In figure 2 the numbers of memes containing different types of letter cases are represented by the colors in the pie chart. Frequencies were run by SPSS software to find the number of instances capital, lowercase, and mixes of the two letterings were used in the sample of memes. Of the 69 memes collected, 47 (68.1%) memes contained a mix of capital and lower case letters, 20 (29%) memes contained all caps, and only 2 (2.9%) memes contained lower case letters only.

Figure 3

*Frequency of Font Colors Used in 2012 Presidential Election Memes Posted on Facebook Pages*



*Figure 3.* Frequencies were run using SPSS software to find the number of instances each font color was used in memes posted to 2012 Presidential election Facebook pages. In figure 3 the numbers of memes containing different font colors are represented above. Of the 69 memes gathered for a sample, 26 (37.7%) memes used multicolored fonts, 23 (33.3%) memes used only white fonts, 13 (18.8%) memes used only black fonts, and only 7 (10.1%) memes used a different solid color other than black or white.

## Appendix B

### Study Codebook

#### A. Text.

**1. Serif:** A serif is a slight projection or line that that finishes off the stroke of a letter. An example would be Times New Roman or Cambria fonts used in Microsoft Word documents.

(Merriam-webster.com, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serif>)

**2. San Serif:** A group of typefaces that do not have a serif or small lines across the top and bottom of letters. An example would be the Arial or Corbel fonts used in Microsoft Word documents. (Merriam-webster.com, <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/sans%20serif>).

**3. Mixed Serif and Sans:** The fonts used by the meme are a mix of two different font types both san serif and serif.

#### B. Lettering.

**1. Capitalization:** The exclusive use of capitalized letters from the English language. The text must only be written in capital letters. Examples include: A,B,C,D,E,F,G,ect.

**2. Lowercase:** The exclusive use of lowercase letters from the English language. The text must only be written in lowercase letters. Examples include: a,b,c,d,e,f,g,ect.

**3. Mixed:** The use of both capitalized and lowercase letters from the English language. The text will feature both capital and lowercase letters within each phrase or sentence or word. For example: Red Apple

**C. Font Color:** Merriam-webster.com defines color as light or visual perception that enables a person to distinguish otherwise identical objects

(<http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/color?show=0&t=1399843560>).

1. **White:** All the text in the meme is the color white.
2. **Black:** All the text in the meme is the color black.
3. **Other Color:** All the text in the meme is one solid color other than black or white, for example red, blue, or orange.
4. **Multicolored:** The text in the meme appears in multiple colors, with some lines or words in different colors than other lines and words.

#### **D. Offensive words.**

1. **Seven Dirty Words:** Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) categorized words based on the Federal Communications Commission guidelines for the seven words that cannot be used on television. They are shit, piss, cunt, fuck, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits. Record all instances of these words as seven dirty words.
2. **Sexual Words:** Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) categorized words based on sexual body parts and sexual acts. Examples of these kinds of word are penis, balls, vagina, and jerking off.
3. **Excretory Words:** Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) categorized these words as having to do with excrement or excretory body parts, such as poop, ass, and asshole. Words of this sort will only be recorded if they lack any sexual references. All references to sexual acts should be recorded in the category above.
4. **Mild Words:** Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) defined the mild category by words that are not strong enough to be ban from network prime time shows. Words such as damn, hell, or slut are examples of mild words. All words involving a sexual act even with the use of mild words

should be recorded in the sexual words category and all words involving the excretory system should be recorded in the excretory category. This category should only be marked if a word is mild enough to hear in casual conversation or in prime-time television, but does not fit into the above categories.

**5. Strong Words:** Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) created a final category to catch words that were too strong to be used on television, but were not a part of the seven dirty words. Words such as bitch or bullshit are placed into this category. Again, only words that do not fit into the other categories should be recorded as strong words.

**6. Other:** Record all words that do not fit into the above categories or are disputed between coders.

**E. Romney Candidate Image-Only code Romney's image in the meme for these things.**

**1. Ideal Candidate:** Photographs or memes in this case will feature the candidate fulfilling the ideal picture of a leader by posing with other leaders, looking serious or having compassion (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). The ideal candidate will either look like a statesman or will be seen having compassion for his followers.

**i. Elected officials:** The candidate appears with people of power or other known elected officials (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**ii. Patriotic symbols:** symbols like flags, monuments and military machinery appear with the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iii. Symbols of progress:** symbols of economic growth, like Wall Street, and technology, like NASA appear with the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iv. Identifiable entourage:** the candidate has an entourage including security personnel,

reporters and aids. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**v. Campaign paraphernalia:** visible symbols, logos and the candidate's name on posters and other campaigning material (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**vi. Political hoopla:** visible confetti, balloons and streamers appear with the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**vii. Formal attire:** the candidate is wearing a suit, it can be a tuxedo, black-tie or conventional business suit. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**i. children:** the candidate appears with children by interacting or holding them. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**ii. Family associations:** the candidate appears with his family members or makes connections to historical family ties (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iii. Admiring women:** the photo has reaction shots of woman expressing awe, wonder or excitement about the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iv. Religious symbols:** the candidate appears in places of worship, or among religious figures. There is a visual association with pulpits, crosses, or other religious symbols. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**v. Affinity gestures:** the candidate is waving, fanning the crowd or giving hand gestures like a thumbs up or peace sign or giving a wink or smile. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**vi. Interaction with individuals:** the candidate is giving attention to well-wishers without physical contact, he/she is engaging with supporters (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**vii. Physical embraces:** the candidate is hugging, embracing, kissing or shaking hands with supporters. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)



**2. Populist Campaigner:** The populist campaigner will appear as “one of the people” and will often be seen with sleeves rolled up or in ordinary clothing doing ordinary things (Goodnow, 2013).

**i. Celebrities:** the candidate appears with known celebrities like actors, musicians, tv personalities and athletes (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**ii. Large audiences:** the photo clearly shows supporters tightly packed into a space or portrays the candidate appearing before a mass of supporters. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**iii. Approving audiences:** the audience is shown applauding, waving, cheering, and wearing campaign paraphernalia (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iv. Interaction with crowds:** the candidate is giving rapid, anonymous handshakes and touches to groups of supporters without a detection of individual interaction (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**i. Informal attire:** the candidate is wearing a tie without a jacket, shirtsleeves are rolled up (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**ii. Casual dress:** the candidate is in khaki pants, slacks or jeans with a long-or short-sleeve shirt or sport coat, jean jacket sweater or other causal garment. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**iii. Athletic clothing:** the candidate is in short pants, jogging gear (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iv. Ordinary people:** the candidate appears with common folk, including visits to disadvantaged communities or manufacturing plants (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**v. Physical activity:** the candidate appears to be participating in common athletic or recreational activities or performing physical work, like serving meals or chopping wood. (Grabe & Bucy).

**3. Sure Loser:** The candidate will be featured with small or disapproving crowds, and will also feature the candidate looking ridiculous or having a frown or displaces “un-approving” facial features (Goodnow, 2013) (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

- 1. Small crowds:** the candidate appears with only a few supporters or supporters are scattered around and empty chairs are visible (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- 2. Disapproving audiences:** the audience is booing, jeering, or making negative hand gestures like flipping the bird or giving a thumbs down, falling asleep during speeches or showing other signs of disinterest. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- 3. Displays of weakness:** the candidate is shown, falling, tripping, and has a lack of coordination or an illness. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- 4. Defiant gestures:** the candidate will punch the air, pound the podium or pump a fist and point fingers, or wring hands together (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- 5. Inappropriate nonverbal displays:** the candidate will exhibit facial expressions, gestures or moods that are incongruent with the text in the photo. For example, a candidate will smile when someone loses a home or laugh when taxes are raised (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- 4. No Candidate:** Romney is not present in the meme.

**F. Obama Candidate Image-Only code Obama's image in the meme for these things.**

- 1. Ideal Candidate:** Photographs or memes in this case will feature the candidate fulfilling the ideal picture of a leader by posing with other leaders, looking serious or having compassion (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). The ideal candidate will either look like a statesman or will be seen having compassion for his followers.
  - i. Elected officials:** The candidate appears with people of power or other known elected officials (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
  - ii. Patriotic symbols:** symbols like flags, monuments and military machinery appear with the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

- iii. Symbols of progress:** symbols of economic growth, like Wall Street, and technology, like NASA appear with the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- iv. Identifiable entourage:** the candidate has an entourage including security personnel, reporters and aids. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)
- v. Campaign paraphernalia:** visible symbols, logos and the candidate's name on posters and other campaigning material (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- vi. Political hoopla:** visible confetti, balloons and streamers appear with the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- vii. Formal attire:** the candidate is wearing a suit, it can be a tuxedo, black-tie or conventional business suit. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)
- i. Children:** the candidate appears with children by interacting or holding them. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)
- ii. Family associations:** the candidate appears with his family members or makes connections to historical family ties (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- iii. Admiring women:** the photo has reaction shots of woman expressing awe, wonder or excitement about the candidate (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- iv. Religious symbols:** the candidate appears in places of worship, or among religious figures. There is a visual association with pulpits, crosses, or other religious symbols. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- v. Affinity gestures:** the candidate is waving, fanning the crowd or giving hand gestures like a thumbs up or peace sign or giving a wink or smile. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).
- vi. Interaction with individuals:** the candidate is giving attention to well-wishers without physical contact, he/she is engaging with supporters (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**vii. Physical embraces:** the candidate is hugging, embracing, kissing or shaking hands with supporters. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

**2. Populist Campaigner:** The populist campaigner will appear as “one of the people” and will often be seen with sleeves rolled up or in ordinary clothing doing ordinary things (Goodnow, 2013).

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**ii. Large audiences:** the photo clearly shows supporters tightly packed into a space or portrays the candidate appearing before a mass of supporters. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009)

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**iii. Athletic clothing:** the candidate is in short pants, jogging gear (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iv. Ordinary people:** the candidate appears with common folk, including visits to disadvantaged communities or manufacturing plants (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**v. Physical activity:** the candidate appears to be participating in common athletic or recreational activities or performing physical work, like serving meals or chopping wood. (Grabe & Bucy).

**3. Sure Loser:** The candidate will be featured with small or disapproving crowds, and will also feature the candidate looking ridiculous or having a frown or displaced “un-approving” facial features (Goodnow, 2013) (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**i. Small crowds:** the candidate appears with only a few supporters or supporters are scattered around and empty chairs are visible (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

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**iii. Displays of weakness:** the candidate is shown, falling, tripping, and has a lack of coordination or an illness. (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**iv. Defiant gestures:** the candidate will punch the air, pound the podium or pump a fist and point fingers, or wring hands together (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**v. Inappropriate nonverbal displays:** the candidate will exhibit facial expressions, gestures or moods that are incongruent with the text in the photo. For example, a candidate will smile when someone loses a home or laugh when taxes are raised (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

**vi. No Candidate:** Obama is not present in the meme.

**G. Photo Manipulation:** Because memes feature user-created or home-made elements (Shifman, 2012) coders should mark in this category if the photo has an element, apart from the text, of manipulation or changes and additions made to the photograph.

**1. Background:** the background has been removed and only a solid colored background remains with a photo and/or words placed over it.

**2. Body of candidate:** if the body of the candidate has been changed, added to or moved. An example would be the placement of Obama's fingers in his ears, or Romney riding on a jet-ski in a flooded street.

**3. Face of the candidate:** the candidate's face will appear on other people's faces, it will be distorted or changed to look similar to other people or to look different from normal.

**4. Additional characters:** if people or animals have been added to the existing photograph record it here. An example would be the placement of a dog peeing on Romney or Obama.

**5. Collage:** if two or more of the above elements are in the meme, record it as a collage, because there are too many manipulations to count in individual categories.

**H. Meta-meme:** Past studies have found that some memes will reference other more popular memes (Knobel & Lanksear, 2006) and (Shifman, 2012). So a collection of 16 popular memes, which were included on end of the year "best of" lists from BuzzFeed.com and Knowyourmeme.com will be coded for in this study. Memes from "best of" lists for the years 2011 and 2012 were included below only if they appeared on both BuzzFeed and Know Your Meme's lists.

These websites were chosen because they boast a collection of stories about internet phenomena and feature end of the year user-voted lists of popular memes that surface on the internet. Only lists from 2011 and 2012 were included because memes will try to stay popular to continue spreading (Blackmore, 1991). Meme names and photo examples are included below. Any disputed meme reference should be recorded last in the category "other" and looked up on both BuzzFeed and Know Your Meme websites to confirm its existence as meme not featured on the list.

*Revision Note:* The list was included as a visual reference. Upon reviewing the memes gathered for this thesis, there were not enough meta-memes to make 16 individual categories so instead coders were asked to record 0 for no meme present and 1 if a meta-meme was present.

**I. Popular Culture:** Memes often pull from an already existing knowledge of culture (Knobel & Lanksear, 2006) so in the following categories record all references either photographic or textual to different aspects of popular culture. For cross-over culture, like for example Harry Potter which is a franchise with films, books and video games, record the reference according to which part of the franchise is being referenced. For example photo stills from the Harry Potter movies will be recorded as film, but references to lines in the book will be recorded as literary.

**1. Music:** any references to popular music or musicians should be recorded with the exception of Rebecca Black and the song Friday which will be recorded as a meta-meme. Examples include album covers, song lyrics, and photos of musicians like Lady GaGa or Katy Perry.

**2. Film:** any references to popular films or actors/directors should be recorded here with the exception of references to television. Only references to major motion pictures should be recorded. Examples could include Star Wars, Harry Potter, The Dark Knight, and the Avengers.

**3. Literature:** record any references to popular literature or authors like Steven King, the Hunger Games, Harry Potter or 50 Shades of Grey. Classic literature can also be recorded in this category.

**4. Video Games:** any references to popular video games like the Halo games, Call of Duty games, Mario and Nintendo characters, or Portal and Portal 2 should be recorded here.

**5. Television:** any references to popular, reality, or classic television shows should be recorded here. Examples would include Star Trek, the Walking Dead, Breaking Bad, Adventure Time or My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. The exceptions include already existing memes like the Angry Captain Picard meme and the Yo Dawg meme which both originated as television references, but have since become meta-memes.

**6. Other:** record all references that are popular in modern culture, but do not fit into categories or are disputed by coders. For example references to zombies, unicorns, and other mythical/science fiction creatures that are not specifically tied to a film, video game, book or television or references to fashion, sports or popular sayings/phrases.

**J. Incongruity:** Because past studies have found that memes often feature an incongruity or abnormality from the original work (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006, and Shifman, 2012) a category was added to count the number of incongruities in the meme sample.

**1. Text:** if the text is at odds or reflects a different message than the picture featured below it. For example, a photo of Mitt Romney working in a soup kitchen with the words “Fake” or a photo of Barack Obama smiling and text about deaths by drowns.

**2. Photo:** if the photo was changed to be at odds with what would normally be viewed. For example, Obama smiling while getting a mug shot or Mitt Romney embracing a stack of money in place of a person. The incongruity must be within the photo itself and not feature text explaining or creating the incongruity.

**K. Pro-anti Facebook Groups:** Code only the Facebook group names. Anti-categories will be negative Facebook group names that have insults, offensive language, or aim to ‘defeat’ a candidate. Pro-categories will be positive Facebook groups promoting the candidate and will



contain complements, affirmations, or will aim to elect the candidate. If the Facebook group name is difficult to code, turn to the memes. If the memes appear to be negative toward the candidate, code the page as Anti, but if they appear to be positive code the page as Pro. Only code for the candidate whose name is in the group.

**1. Pro-Obama:** The group has positive messages and language about Obama. Defined as messages of support, joy, and admiration.

**2. Pro-Romney:** The group has positive messages and language about Romney. Defined as messages of support, joy, and admiration.

**3. Anti-Obama:** The group has negative messages and language about Obama. Defined as insults, offensive language, and defeating the candidate.

**4. Anti-Romney:** The group has negative messages and language about Romney. Defined as insults, offensive language, and defeating the candidate.