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Mememes Beyond Virality: An abductive thematic analysis on memetic communication in politically active youth, aged 18 to 27

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My deepest gratitude is dedicated to Jakob Hartman, whose drive and wisdom became a compass for this journey. Even in his absence, the enduring influence of his uncompromising honesty continues to serve as my guiding beacon, as potent in death as it was in life.

Abstract:

In this exploratory study, the communicative role of political memes and their influence on group dynamics are examined through an abductive research approach. The method involves semi-structured interviews with politically active individuals spanning the political spectrum. This study reveals complex tribal and inter-group relationships by classifying political memes into attacking, idolising, internal, and external categories. It challenges the prevalent notion of virality as the primary measure of successful memes, instead emphasising the importance of three elements: relevance, humour, and tribalism. When these elements resonate with a meme-consumer, it can be considered successful, regardless of viral reach. The study underscores the need for deep understanding of a target demographic and contemporary internet culture for the effective use of memes in strategic communication, thereby recognising their significant potential in shaping cultural, social, and political discourse.

Keywords: *Memes, Strategic Communication, Tribalism, Political Communication, Social Media Marketing.*

Table of contents:

1. Introduction	4
2. Background, Problem and Purpose	5
2.1 Purpose and research questions	6
3. Previous research	8
3.1 The meme gap	8
3.3 Memes as marketing	9
3.4 Political memes	11
3.5 The Tribal Meme	12
4. Theoretical framework	14
4.1 Tribalism, collectivism and the Hive switch	14
4.2 Memes	15
4.3 Humour	16
4.4 Ambiguity and interpretation	16
5. Method	18
5.1 Research Design	18
5.2 Abductive Thematic Analysis Process	19
6. Analysis	26
6.1 Reading the results	26
6.2 In-group expression, differences between tribes	27
6.3 Out-group dynamics and identity	32
6.4 Meme savviness	33
6.5 Tribal lens	36
7. Discussion	37
7.1 Defining a successful meme	37
7.2 Tribal interpretations	38
7.3 Utilising the tribal lens	39
7.4 The function of memes in tribalistic groups	40
7.5 Meme culture	44
7.6 Rejecting memes	46
8. Conclusion	47
9. References	48
10. Appendix	51
Appendix 1. Memes used for elicitation	51
Appendix 2. Code Chart	54
Appendix 3. Codebook	55
Appendix 4. Interview Guide	60
Appendix 5. Interview Transcript	61

1. Introduction

Why are memes important? Memes have become an integral part of our daily lives, providing laughter and serving as a unique form of communication. Yet these seemingly simple images and snippets scattered across the internet offer more than just amusement. They play a crucial role in how we interact, share ideas, and create meaning with our friends, colleagues, and communities. Memes have established a prominent presence in our digital landscape, adapting and transforming to suit new groups and narratives. They assume a variety of shapes and forms, representing the diverse perspectives and experiences of their creators and consumers. This dynamic nature makes memes not only fascinating but also challenging to study, given their constantly evolving nature.

Drawing from the significance of memes as cultural replicators (Dawkins, 1976), the concept of neotribalism (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018), and the often overlooked role of memes in political communication (Francia, 2018; Way, 2021), this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach. The aim is to address key questions about how memes influence political discourse and group dynamics, particularly within youth political parties. This involves exploring the interpretation of memes within these political groups. Moreover, their role in shaping political discourse is scrutinised and their strategic usage for communication is investigated.

Focusing on the age group 18 to 27 allows for the examination of a demographic that is both active within a certain community and has a good understanding of digital and meme culture. This demographic provides a unique window into the intersection of these phenomena.

2. Background, Problem and Purpose

Memes have both historical and contemporary cultural elements, competing for cognitive attention in two vastly competitive arenas, politics and the internet. Memes that are funny, memorable, and relevant, result in adoption and propagation, as according to Vasile et al. (2021) and Way (2021) they appeal to the emotions of its consumers. Consumer emotions can link them together into a neotribe (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018), which in the context of politically active youth is reflected on their brand of choice, the political party.

In recent years, research has shown social media to play a significant role in creating a perception of the world and in branding identity among young adults (Liu & McLaughlin 2020). The frequent use of memes in social media by political youth parties and the use of memes overall in the political landscape indicate that memes play a role in shaping both relationships and culture (Francia, 2018).

However, the role of memes in communication is often undervalued, as shown by the research environment presented in the next section. While researchers acknowledge the influence of social media in contemporary politics, the specific impact of memes is seldom discussed. Current studies highlight the popularity and effect of memes but fail to define their role in strategic political discourse among diverse groups. As diverse cultural artefacts (Dawkins, 1976), memes play a significant role in political communication, particularly within tightly knit communities. Memes can stimulate accessible political discussion (Milner, 2013) despite concerns about their definition (Baurecht, 2020), ambiguity (Fang, 2018) or lack of nuance (Way, 2021), and serve effectively in both external and internal communication (Vasile et al., 2021; Adan & Howard, 2022).

The full extent of the influence of memes on political discourse and society, including their potential benefits, remains unclear. Despite recognising their utility in external and internal communication, the strategic potential of memes is largely unexplored in academic literature, indicating a significant research gap.

2.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of memes in shaping political discourse and opinions among youth in political parties, specifically within group environments. To determine the significance of memes as a communication tool in cultural and political contexts, this study will explore the use and interpretation of memes among Swedish youth who are active in various political organisations to understand meme functions in political communication. In the presupposition that political parties function as tribes, the aim of this study is to investigate how memes are interpreted and potentially differ between different groups, and to shed light on political meme usage within these groups. The study will focus on two primary research questions in exploring the subject, utilising key considerations from the theoretical background; tribalism, memes, humour, ambiguity and interpretation.

Research Question 1: How are memes interpreted within and between polarised tribalistic groups?

Taking group dynamics, cultural belonging and shared political opinions into account we question how these phenomena shape the interpretations of memes. In the context of this question, the understanding of "tribalism" will be key in examining group dynamics, cultural belonging, and shared political opinions. The theory of neotribalism, hive switch, and homo duplex will guide the exploration of the collective identities of these groups, their inherent group-oriented nature, and their externalisation of group identity through branding. The theories of "memes" and "ambiguity and interpretation" will further aid in understanding how these tribal groups interpret memes, considering the complex and culturally symbolic nature of memes and the inherent ambiguity that allows for diverse interpretations. Finally, "humour" will help us understand the emotional aspect and the shared cultural understanding that drives the success and virality of memes within these groups.

Research Question 2: How effective are memes as strategic tools for political communication in terms of communicating complex ideas and targeting specific audiences?

The framework of "memes", particularly the understanding of memes as complex cultural artefacts, will be essential in exploring their effectiveness in communicating complex political ideas in a complex setting. The concept of "ambiguity and interpretation" provides a lens to investigate how memes can target specific audiences by relying on the recipients' ability to decode and derive meanings based on their social and cultural contexts. The role of "humour" in rendering a meme successful, including the theory that humour should be unexpected yet harmless, will provide insights into how memes can effectively target audiences and go viral. Lastly, using the term "tribalism" it is possible to explore how memes can be used strategically within and between different political tribes, considering their group dynamics and shared cultural and political identities.

3. Previous research

The field of meme research often appears diverse or fragmented, given the broad range of interpretations and applications associated with memes. As memes are typically community-specific, this study will focus on their usage within a political context.

To assess the research gap, a few searches in the Lund University research database (LUBsearch) reveals a conspicuous absence of peer reviewed research examining memes within the context of group adherence or behaviour between 1st of January 2018 and 15th of May 2023. When the term "meme" was used in specific searches, the results were revealing: ""meme" branding" returned only 8 results, ""meme" marketing" had 512, ""meme" neotribalism" had none, ""meme" tribalism" only 4, and ""meme" strategic communications" had 12. These results suggest a significant gap in the current understanding of the role of memes in group dynamics, particularly regarding tribalism and neotribalism, and emphasise the need for further exploration.

3.1 The meme gap

Dawkins (1976) coined the term "meme" in his pivotal book *The Selfish Gene* as a diverse range of cultural artefacts that replicate through cultural transmission. It lays the foundation for further definition but lacks the nuances that numerous scholars have attempted to apply over the years. Despite being discussed in various fields such as psychology, philosophy, and anthropology, memes have been largely overlooked in the realm of strategic communications.

The revival of the term in the digital era was sparked by a phenomenon that is arguably defining of contemporary communications, the "internet meme", popularised as the significance of social media became apparent (Shifman, 2013. p. 264). This participatory culture is highly compatible with the way culture is formed in the contemporary online environment (Shifman, 2013). However, the definition by Dawkins (1976) iteratively allows wide interpretive space in categorisation, which thus far has been limited to the form, content, and context that according to Shifman (2013) permeate and surround any specific meme.

While the internet meme is not defined with particular specificity (Shifman, 2013), the effects have as recently as 2022 been measured in several ways in various fields of research. Geniole et al.,(2022) show that short exposure to memes can have psychological effects on

decision making, with exposure times of less than 1 minute appearing to have effects on intention towards COVID-19 vaccination. While the effects of that study were limited, the findings are further supported by Myrick et al.,(2022) in coping with COVID-19 related stress. In this study, viewing memes was associated with more positive emotions, and did not show significant indications of stress related to meme viewing. Similarly, Adan & Howard (2022) showed that memes can facilitate the initiation and shaping of conversations about domestic abuse, ultimately providing a supportive function for members of the groups they researched. It is an important distinction to make that the function of memes were not explicit in this case, but served as a medium for conveying support from the group to each individual (Adan & Howard, 2022).

Laineste & Voolaid (2017) highlight humorous aspects of memes as particularly important when sharing memes and expressing cultural nuances. Defining internet humour was shown to be a significant aspect when emphasising cultural differences (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong (2015) primarily focused on the role of humour in the dissemination of memes and the nature of the shared content. The study involved examining the types of memes circulated and delving into the concept of humour in an attempt to categorise the humorous aspects of memes.

While much work has been done to define and categorise memes, current interpretations often overlook the complexities of their use in group dynamics. This gap leaves us with an incomplete understanding of how memes influence group behaviour and cohesion, which is the focus of our research.

3.2 Memes as marketing

The modern market has grown more complicated and saturated, leaving many brands increasingly desperate in their strategies to attract consumers (Vasile et al.,2021). Memes are a potential solution to alter consumer perception of brands (Vasile et al.,2021). Memes can be both efficient and cost effective in boosting brand awareness as well as engagement (Malodia et al., 2022), although this approach largely ignores that memes are not just about relatability, humour, or topicality; they are also a form of cultural expression that thrives on creativity and community involvement.

Memes are designed to be quick and witty, and show great potential in eliciting emotions from consumers, such as amusement or outrage (Vasile et al., 2021; Way, 2021). While there has been a keen interest in identifying the necessary components of a viral meme, the formula remains obscure (Malodia et al., 2022). However, relevance is suggested as a necessary component of a popular meme in regard to the content being relatable, familiar and non-controversial (Malodia et al., 2022). Non-controversial may be debatable, considering the prevalence of memes with political, racist and sexist content (Way, 2022).

While there are successful examples of meme marketing, such as Ryan-Air’s social media presence (Image 2.1), there are numerous brands that have attempted and failed to appeal to audiences with memes or attempts at internet culture. Examples of these are DiGirno’s misunderstanding of the hashtag #WhyIStayed (Stampler, 2014), and McDonalds’ misused “Say no more fam” (Radulovic, 2018). There appears to be little research on the effects of failed meme-marketing strategies, or which brands are more or less suitable to use memes as a marketing strategy.



Image 2.1. An example of a well received meme by a brand that utilises meme-marketing. (Instagram @Ryanair, May 16th 2023)

The concept of political parties as brands and the choices voters make during elections closely resemble decisions made when selecting commercial products (Kaur & Sohal, 2018). The same marketing tools and concepts used for products are also applicable to political parties and their representatives (Kaur & Sohal, 2018). By extending these marketing concepts to the realm of political memes, it becomes evident that memes can act as a form of marketing, influencing how people perceive and interact with political brands. Memes can thus be created, shared, and co-created among political supporters. This aligns with the concept of co-creation, as Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2018) claims to be a way for active consumers to mould a personalised experience, which not only grants an accurate product, but also deepens the connection the consumer has with the brand. A consumer with a solid positive emotional connection to a brand can both identify with it and differentiate from other brands, which subsequently directs them towards the brand they have the connection with (Banerjee & Chaudhuri, 2022). There is clearly a potential of memes to be employed for marketing purposes, but as seen with McDonalds (Radulovic, 2018) there is also a lack of understanding of memes as a concept and culture.

Malodia et. al (2022) acknowledges the research that caution against meme-marketing as risky and hard to control at times, but nevertheless claims memes are an essential part of digital marketing. While the potential of memes for marketing purposes is clear, there is an apparent lack of insight into why meme-marketing strategies fail. This study aims to fill this gap by examining both positive and negative reactions to memes to build upon the previous research.

3.3 Political memes

Although internet memes have become increasingly prominent in everyday political communication and behaviour, there have been little theoretical exploration of their emergent implication on politics. While studies have shown humour in everyday cultural and political productions can have an impact on the political landscape, it is still unclear to which extent and how memes differentiate from other forms of social media (Basphehlivan 2023). Way (2021) states that political memes that lean on emotion and affect have a certain impact and are shared widely; however, memes do not contain nuanced and detailed information on politics, and often lean towards emotional discourses. This does little to create an informed opinion on subjects, and

in addition certain messages shared in memes have the potential to stir anger, and could affect decisions on for example voting (Way, 2021).

Milner's (2013) study on the sharing of memes leading up to and during the occupation of Wall Street in 2011 suggests popular and accessible media like memes can lead to positive conversations with multiple viewpoints. Multiple ways of communicating and presenting arguments through participatory media was observed, which allowed a diverse range of political perspectives to be shared. Milner (2013) further argued these types of platforms and practices can encourage public discourse and political engagement.

Internet memes have been used to enable citizens to express discrete political criticism and mobilise collective action (Fang, 2018). Despite heavy censorship, through the use of satirical idolisation of a political leader, the study suggests the memes are a form of political criticism as well as a playful expression within a bounded community. Fang (2018) highlights the duality of memes as a form of communication that is both transmissive and ritualistic, suggesting memes can be a way to express identity and collect social and cultural capital.

Despite the prominence of memes in political communication, the theoretical implications of memes remain largely unexplored. This study aims to contribute to this underdeveloped area by exploring how political memes are interpreted and used in a political environment.

3.4 The Tribal Meme

The social persuasion link, described by Haidt (2013), may play a role in how memes are shared within tribal groups. The social persuasion process involves making snap judgements without deep reflection. This may emphasise shared group values and inside jokes, as they are both encouraged and connected to the tribe, thereby highlighting group identity or differences. People belonging to a certain group often focus on their own identity to such a degree that they fail to acknowledge legitimacy within other groups (Haidt, 2013). This process, coupled with the forthcoming discussion on the Hive Switch, emphasises the potential power and influence of memes within tribal dynamics.

Despite the apparent link between memes and group behaviour, the function of memes in this context has been relatively under-discussed in previous research. Martynyuk & Meleshchenko (2022) provide a study that emphasises the significance of memes, particularly in

Twitter-based internet memes. In this study it is argued that there is conceptual dissonance created in triggering evaluative inferences and emotional responses, which in turn has an effect on the political landscape. Memes are emphasised as communicative tools that can create a negative image of a political figure (Martynyuk & Meleshchenko, 2022). This duality of tribal behaviours is further emphasised by Haidt (2013) in the description of *homo duplex*, where joy is experienced when being a part of a whole. Haidt (2013) describes *homo duplex* with only one sentence:

“ We live most of our lives in the ordinary (profane) world, but we achieve our greatest joys in those brief moments of transit to the sacred world, in which we become “simply a part of a whole.” “

Finally, Rosenbaum-Elliot et al. (2018) underscores the significance of positive associations and emotional connections, especially as they relate to previous experiences with a brand. Essentially, a positive encounter with a brand can foster a favourable emotional perspective within that context, which leads to emotion-driven choices being almost instantaneous (Rosenbaum-Elliot et al., 2018). Considering a political party as a brand, the role of branding in politics becomes a process of reinforcing individual alignment with a specific group. This adheres to Haidt's (2018) assertion that being part of a whole generates positive experiences, which incite positive reactions to related materials or narratives.

4. Theoretical framework

This study commenced with several loosely defined ideas, among those the phenomenon of neotribalism within a political context and the utilisation of memes as a communication tool. Intensive immersion in the material and literature led to the refinement and precise definition of certain ideas, while others were discarded. In its final form, the theoretical framework consists of five primary concepts which are described here.

These concepts are interwoven and offer a comprehensive understanding of the political meme culture among young adults. The concept of tribalism helps to understand the social dynamics of political affiliations. Memes act as vehicles for communication within these tribal affiliations. Humour influences acceptance and propagation of memes, while ambiguity and interpretation allow for varied understandings, adding complexity. Together, these concepts provide a nuanced framework to analyse the role and influence of memes within tribes.

4.1 Tribalism, collectivism and the Hive switch

Neotribalism captures the concept of loosely connected groups that help shape the identities of those affiliated with the brand (Rosenbaum-Elliot et al., 2018). As political parties can be seen as brands (Kaur & Sohal, 2018) the term neotribalism is extended to affiliations in the context of political groups, highlighting the importance of understanding their dynamics. Furthermore, the Hive switch illustrates the ability to transition from an individualistic mindset to a collective and group-oriented mindset triggered by factors such as shared threats, powerful group experiences, laughter, sharing, or rituals (Haidt, 2013). Memes serve as a medium for activating the Hive Switch, as they facilitate synchronised behaviours and shared experiences.

Francia's (2018) highlights strategic use of engaging content to generate 'free media' coverage. Using memes in this manner thus capitalises on groupish tendencies and activates the Hive Switch, fostering unity among followers. Together, these processes underline the potential power and influence of memes within tribal dynamics.

Furthermore, branding serves as an externalisation and promotion mechanism for the groups identity to appeal to a wider audience in an attempt to sway their perceptions (Vasile, 2021). In this study, the aim is to investigate the experiences and views of politically active young people in the ages 18 to 27. These individuals exhibit characteristics of neotribalism,

wherein their identity is both individual and collective around their affiliation. These participants show both the hive switch, and homo duplex phenomenons detailed by Haidt (2013) by setting aside their personal opinion in favour of a collective group stance, and the branding properties of their affiliated groups.

Given this amalgamation of characteristics, the terms “tribe”, “tribal” and “tribalism” are proposed to describe the phenomenon associated with adherence to a politically affiliated group. These terms are important to distinguish from the loose connections formed within the similarly named neotribalism, although tribalism incorporates some of the concepts detailed in neotribalism.

Tribalism brings together several ideas about group behaviour and values in political affiliations into one unified term. By combining these concepts, a clear understanding of how these political groups operate and interact is enabled, as this concept affects the behaviours and interpretations of tribals. Throughout this study tribalism plays a central role in coding, decoding and theorising from the data collected in the interviews.

4.2 Memes

Internet memes, often circulated in chatrooms and forums, are typically text and image based, but may also be in video format (Wiggins & Bower, 2015). They are not merely combinations of different types of information, but complex cultural artefacts that contain symbolic meaning and social significance (Wiggins & Bower, 2015). This social aspect is highly compatible with the way culture is formed in the contemporary online environment (Shifman, 2013), and is therefore a necessary consideration to be aware of to understand what memes are. Commonly, memes are reactions to current events (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). While they may start conversations and highlight issues (Milner 2011), memes catering to humour have limitations when it comes to fostering an informed public discourse (Way, 2021).

The term "meme" has a long-standing history, and "internet meme" is a subset of this category. However, for the purpose of this study, the term "meme" will be used interchangeably with "internet meme" and other types of memes, as their purposes are congruent. This study does not delve into the discussion of what is considered a meme, but rather focuses on theoretical concepts to examine their influence and potential. Two primary types of memes that are prevalent in a political context are acknowledged, attack memes and idolisation memes. Attack

memes are defined by their expression of criticism against an opponent while idolisation memes depicts a symbol that is admired within the tribe. For a detailed list of memes used in this study, see Appendix 1.

This study recognizes that understanding memes requires more than a singular functional or perspective lens. Therefore, a comprehensive, holistic approach is adopted to comprehend the multifaceted role of memes.

4.3 Humour

Humour represents an integral part of memes, shaping their interpretation and promoting dissemination in social groups.. Laineste & Voolaid (2017) highlight the significant role of humour in communication, particularly on social media. Further the authors argue that it is a deeply rooted behaviour, and specifically characterise internet humour as a form of cultural communication that promotes bonding and positive emotions. However, they note that humorous content is unpredictable, and it is difficult to anticipate what humorous content will become popular. The significance of addressing humour in this study lies in its integral connection to the dynamics of meme communication, while acknowledging the inherent complexity and vastness of the concept. Due to this complexity, the study cannot cover the full range of humour comprehensively, it aims to explore how humour in memes fosters collective experiences and attitudes.

Taecharunroj & Nueangjamnong (2015) found that humour, especially of an offensive variety, is a key ingredient for memes to go viral. This aligns with Haidt's (2013) concept of the Hive Switch, as shared aggression delivered humorously can foster collective experiences and synchronised behaviours, potentially triggering the switch. As such, funny memes serve not only as communication tools within tribes, but also as catalysts for activating collective identities and behaviours, aligning individuals with the group and emphasising shared values or threats.

4.4 Ambiguity and interpretation

The meme as a concept, or entity, is ambiguous in the sense that it is possible for it to both change and develop its meaning as it is being shared (Fang, 2018). Fang (2018) exemplifies this with memes that originally functioned as a discreet criticism in an environment of

censorship, can change their meaning and become cultural artefacts that discerns members of the tribe from non-members. This ambiguity allows insight into the development of meme cultures, and it shows a significance of memes as rhetorical tools within tribal groups.

However, there is another layer to the ambiguity of memes that relates to the condensed format that is generally attributed to memes found on social media. As shown in the elicitation material (Appendix 1), the information available to the meme consumer is limited to between merely one or several words. The lack of nuance in memes lends itself to not providing adequate information, and thus relies on the meme consumer to contextualise and interpret the meme. This understanding of memes aligns with the perspective that interpretations of memes are largely driven by emotion (Way, 2021).

This study explores ambiguity in memes and allows interview participants to discuss their interpretations when elicited memes of varying ambiguous quality, and thus providing an opportunity to investigate the underlying reasoning behind interpretations within a given tribe. It is therefore important to acknowledge that ambiguity is not only relevant to how memes disseminate or change, but also how memes can be interpreted by individuals in different tribes.

5. Method

In this section, the research design, approach, and data analysis strategies that have been adopted to generate new knowledge about the use and impact of political memes in digital culture are detailed. The exploratory and abductive research design empowered the study to delve into the topic and uncover complex social phenomena. This section guides the reader through the integral stages of the study, including strategies, processes, and the critical role intuition played in exploring a complex topic.

5.1 Research Design

5.1.1 Exploring the Field

Given the novelty of this topic, the primary goal of this study is to generate new knowledge and hypotheses which could inform future research. To achieve this aim, an exploratory and abductive research design was adopted. Exploratory research in social science is vital for the development of new theories and understanding of complex social phenomena, requiring flexibility and openness to unexpected findings (Stebbins, 2011).

Empirical studies may occasionally begin with intuition, though it is often absent in qualitative research (Kump, 2020). For example, intuition has been used in studies exploring new and complex contexts, where researchers draw on their experiences in digital culture and social media to aid data collection and analysis (Salge & Karahanna, 2018, as discussed by Kump, 2020). Intuitive findings must thus be validated, which can be achieved through justifying the findings (Kump, 2020).

However, it is worth noting that the apparent absence of intuition in qualitative research might not be an accurate reflection of its actual involvement. Researchers could potentially underreport their use of intuition due to concerns about its acceptance within the scientific community. Reliance on intuition may be perceived as less rigorous or objective compared to more traditional, data-driven approaches. As such, the role of intuition might be obscured or downplayed in the final presentation of research, despite its potential contributions to the initial stages of study design, data collection, and analysis.

The importance of nuance, flexibility, and creativity is frequently emphasised in literature on qualitative research (Stebbins, 2011), which supports the idea of incorporating a degree of

intuition into qualitative research methodology. With no consensus on meme definition nor function in current research, and their usability still being studied, the authors of this study utilised their subjective digital culture experience to intuitively determine which material warranted exploration. It was the impression that many nuances of individual memes were not always detected in formal research. Combining systematic exploration and intuition seems to be advantageous, as it fosters creativity and enables immersion in the subject.

5.1.2 A Qualitative Study

A qualitative research approach enables a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the participants' intersubjective world and their understanding of their experiences within it (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014). Utilising abductive thematic analysis, the qualitative research interviews in this study contributed to the development of a scientific perspective on the subject matter. By adopting the abductive thematic analysis approach, there is no obligation to fit data within established theories through testing and finding a singular objective truth (Thompson, 2022). The goal of this study is instead to seek a logical and useful explanation to a particular phenomena. By iteratively revisiting empirical material procedurally throughout the abductive research process, the analytical interpretations can be enriched (Eksell & Thelander, 2014).

To fully understand the nuances of the memes, an insider perspective is crucial. With this in mind, considerable time was devoted to become organically immersed in the subject matter. This deep immersion provided invaluable insights that enabled intuitive identification of trends to pursue various leads. It also enriched the understanding of the phenomenon and spurred creativity. Thus, the enhanced comprehension of the subject is a testament to the critical importance of thorough immersion.

5.2 Abductive Thematic Analysis Process

5.2.1 Familiarisation through immersion: Collection strategy for elicitation material

In order to identify patterns within empirical data, an abductive approach was employed, starting by immersion in materials related to the subject, specifically political memes. The first step in Thompson's (2022) abductive thematic analysis guide involves familiarisation and transcription, yet it largely overlooks the preliminary research process of familiarisation in favour of data collection through methods such as interviews. Though it is seemingly

uncomplicated, the initial process of familiarisation with the material presents subtle complexities, as the act of observation relies, to a certain extent, on intuition. This process served as a framework for the study, enabling creation of the interview guide for the subsequent data-gathering step to facilitate an elicitation element for the semi-structured interviews used to gather the primary data.

5.2.2 Stratified sampling

To comprehend meme usage among politically engaged individuals, those aged 18-27 within various politically affiliated associations were selected through a stratified selection process, chosen for their general internet literacy and exposure to memes found online. Analysing those 17 and younger, though potentially insightful, was excluded due to the complexity of obtaining parental consent.

Using a stratified sampling method, a population can be divided into subgroups and selected for their similarities and differences, but also for their ability to appropriately address the topic being researched (Bryman, 2011). This ensured representation from both the left and right political blocks: The Moderates, who were represented by a member of the Moderate Student Association in Lund; The Green Party, with a participant from the Young Greens; The Liberals, via a municipal politician; Vänsterpartiet, through a representative of the Young Left; and finally, the Sweden Democrats, who were represented by a member of the Young Swedes SDU.

It should be noted that these are the only associations that agreed to appear for interviews, which is considerably less than the associations who were asked to participate. To increase the probability of participation, the participants were given the option to have the interview digitally which ultimately secured an additional two participants. With this limitation in width of data, the focus was instead extended to reaching a deeper and more intimate qualitative dataset. In turn, this allowed us to conduct longer interviews to attempt to extract information that would be difficult to ascertain in shorter interviews. As such, it is important to acknowledge this limitation when analysing the results and drawing conclusions from this study. Although this is the case, it is arguably a positive outcome for an exploratory methodology to gain deeper insights rather than a wide sample.

5.2.3 Interview strategy

Taking the focus of the study into consideration, a semi-structured interview approach was employed. The semi-structured interview allows a researcher to delve into the central themes present in the participant's intersubjectivity (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). According to Bryman (2008) it is important to ask open ended questions, allowing space for the interviewed to delve into subjects they find important and not be limited by the interviewer's preconceptions. This will allow alternative ideas and perspectives to form during the collection of data. Bryman (2008) adds that although leaving space for unexpected findings and questions are important, in the process of making an interview guide one must also determine which questions must be asked in order to answer the research question. See Appendix 4 for the interview guide.

During these conversations, interviewers were attentive to the participant's tone of voice, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues, similar to everyday interactions. Kvale & Brinkmann (2014) emphasised the significance of understanding both the implied and explicit messages conveyed by the participants in qualitative interviews. This becomes relevant in Thomposson (2022) abductive thematic analysis where the aim is to discover latent themes. Kvale (2014) especially emphasises the need for active listening in qualitative interviews, not only to understand implied messages but also to be able to ask meaningful follow-up questions.

To ensure participants were not under the illusion that the memes subjected to them reflected interviewer standpoints, they were promptly informed of the varied origins in order to alleviate any distrust or discomfort the memes may cause. Furthermore, to ensure the integrity of the preceding discussions, the elicitation component was positioned towards the end of the interview at which point the participants were asked to freely express their thoughts on the presented image. Although the content and themes for an interview are predetermined, the discussion is largely steered by the interview participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

Bryman (2008) notes the importance of acknowledging interview limitations, as anxiety can impact the results. Such anxieties can be observed in Participant 3 and measures to alleviate them prior to the interview were taken, however it may still affect the result.

Following initial responses, discussions typically advance in a reflective manner, with interviewers seeking deeper understanding from participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). This methodology facilitated a comprehensive exploration of participants' viewpoints and

interpretations of the memes, contextualised within their political affiliations. This ensured a more open and unbiased exploration of the participants' perspectives on the presented memes.

Key ethical considerations for the interview are confidentiality and anonymity. The participants were informed before the interviews that their identities would not appear in the study and that all recordings would be deleted post-study to prevent any possible identification.

5.2.4 Elicitation strategy

Utilising image elicitation in interviews allows for participants to link their thoughts to a greater social context (Copes & Ragland, 2022). Although elicitation may not yield a better interview, it can stimulate a meaningful context for both the interviewer and the interviewee to base the discussion on (Bryman, 2011). Eksell & Thelander (2014) exemplify using imagery as “communicative bridges” (p. 64), which help the discussion flow more naturally and allows for more natural silence when reflecting and studying the image. In this context, elicitation facilitates the discussion by demonstrating a particular phenomenon in meme format, thereby avoiding misunderstandings regarding what constitutes a meme, and it elicits a reaction which can be further explored and reflected upon during the interview.

To facilitate a smooth interview process, there should be an attempt to balance visually appealing and relevant themes in the elicitation material; while relevant themes should be prioritised, there is disparity and ambiguity in the practical process of material selection (Copes & Ragland, 2022). Therefore, in a semi-structured interview with politically invested participants, memes of a political variety were selected from various sources to ensure a thematic range appropriate for the study. After being immersed in political memes on several social media platforms a large dataset was gathered and structured to feasibly elicit reactions in various ways from persons with a wide range of political anchor points. The initial selection was reduced to a final seven memes from the following criteria.

(1) Each meme was required to have a political inclination, either explicitly or implicitly favouring a left-wing, right-wing, or ambiguous political perspective. (2) An assortment of both more and less common meme formats was chosen to engage participants with varying preferences, incorporating both still images and videos to cater to the visual appeal. (3) Finally, to enhance the relevance of themes in the elicitation process, contemporary and controversial

themes were prioritised during the selection process. The memes detailed in Appendix 1 were ultimately selected for elicitation during the interviews.

5.2.5. Elicitation process

The initial engagement led to exploration of channels across various Swedish social media platforms that incorporate memes in diverse ways. Over several weeks, prior to the designated time for writing this thesis, in-depth exploration of political memes took place. The interest was not driven by politics itself, but rather by the discovery of distinct patterns in political memes, which was ultimately attributed to a form of tribalist behaviour.

This behaviour aligns with the concept of neotribalism, as interpreted by Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2018), wherein tribal members associate a part of their identity with a brand which in this case is a political party. During this process, noteworthy memes were primarily found in right-block themed channels which lead to subsequent requests from politically active acquaintances within the left block to provide notable memes they had encountered. While this step may be heavily subject to bias, it was necessary to gather data from both left and right blocks, as memes tend to be shared in various non-public ways.

The selection of these specific memes was due to their variety, with some directly satirising opposing parties or representatives, while others conveyed admiration for individuals or ideals, serving as a form of internal praise. These memes were later labelled as either attacking or idolising, which became apparent in the analysis of the data.

5.2.6 Transcription process

All interviews were audio recorded, with the participants' consent, to ensure accuracy and facilitate the transcription process. The recordings were then manually transcribed verbatim, with the exception of non-verbal reactions which were briefly described in parentheses.

For ethical reasons and to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, all personal information was removed from the transcripts, effectively rendering them anonymous. This included names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, and any other identifying details of the participant or mentioned by the participant. Participants were assigned unique numerical names (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) to differentiate them within the transcripts. To filter out digressions and casual conversations related to the research topic, both authors reviewed the

transcripts and removed any content that deviated too far from the research questions or interview guide. This process ensured that the final transcripts only contained relevant information and excluded any personal information or descriptions that could identify the individual. The process of eliminating digressions and off topic material from a transcript is considered normal practice in qualitative research (Bryman, 2011)

5.2.7 Coding and Codebook

While coding is to some degree arbitrary, it is central to enable worthwhile analysis (Bryman, 2011). The coding process connects phrases and sentiment within the transcript to codes which enables a qualitative analysis of consequence and patterns (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). This is a process that cannot be standardised, and is therefore based on the experiences expressed in the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). However, coding may be imperfect as it could fail to capture certain nuances in participant responses that are not represented by the assigned code (Bryman, 2011).

The codes within this study were identified over several reviews of the transcript, and emerged over the course of these reviews as the data became increasingly apparent through the lens of the study. Each code is detailed in the codebook.

The codebook in an abductive thematic analysis is not meant to objectively measure accuracy of data, but to allow reflection and comparison of coding choices as well as to gauge representability of the specific codes through the "when to use" and "when not to use" frames under each code (Thompson, 2022). This process prevents overlapping codes, and produces a level of verifiability (Thompson, 2022).

5.2.8 Thematisation

Themes are developed by aggregating codes so they can collectively explain certain phenomena (Thompson, 2022). By examining relationships between codes, and effectively grouping and labelling them, some aspects of the data can be justifiably represented (Thompson, 2022). It is, however, ultimately up to the judgement of the researcher to decide what counts as a theme (Campbell et al., 2021). Ideally the theme will occur many times across the data, but frequency is not necessarily what determines the importance of the theme (Campbell et al.,

2021). There is also no set frequency of codes for something to qualify as a theme (Thompson 2022).

Through thematic analysis, latent themes can be produced using theory to conceptualise and explain the discoveries (Campbell et al., 2021) Theorization is an essential part of abductive reasoning, which is why researchers must aim for latent themes when conducting an abductive thematic analysis (Thompson, 2022). Through the analysis conducted in this study, five distinct themes emerged within the thirteen codes, which will be explored in greater detail in the analysis below.

The codes are distributed into the themes as follows. The in-group dynamics and identity theme (codes 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10) reflects how belonging to a tribe affects how people understand and react to memes. The out-group dynamics and identity theme (codes 2, 4, 8) considers how people view and interact with other groups using memes. The meme savviness theme (codes 11, 12, 13) explores how people understand and use memes to communicate and bond with their communities. Finally, the tribal lens theme (code #9) reflects how people interpret memes based on their group connections.

6. Analysis

6.1 Reading the results

In the codebook (Appendix 3), each code is presented with a definition and a guide to how to, and how not to, apply the code, and finally concludes with an example. The participants are semi-ambiguously sorted from left to right wing politics in the tables below in accordance with their position on the political spectrum. The codes are numbered as per the list below, followed by an excerpt from the codebook.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. Tribalism in-group | 6. Meme perception:
Idolise | 10. Meme-use to build
social or cultural
capital |
| 2. Tribalism
out-group | a. Positive | 11. Memes as an
interactive tool |
| 3. Us-and-them | b. Negative | 12. Meme-use
dissonance |
| 4. Across the border | 7. Reaction
dissonance | 13. Claimed function
of memes |
| 5. Meme perception:
Attack | 8. Interpretation space | |
| a. Positive | 9. Tribal lens | |
| b. Negative | | |

Code #1: Tribalism in-group
Definition: Participant reflects on how he/she is part of a group.
When to use: Apply this code when the participant relays their role, position or general inclusivity in a group. This includes when they say they have had, will have or could have communications with said group, and when values or practices of the group are revered,
When to NOT use: Do not apply this code when the participant compares or contrasts their group to another group.
Example: Participant 4 talks about their party singing songs together.

Figure 1. Excerpt from codebook. Code #1 (Appendix 3).

The Code Chart (Appendix 2, Table 6.2) shows that the interviews were of varying quality in terms of richness of relevant data. Participant 4 was significantly more nuanced than Participant 3, for instance, as can be observed in the sum of codes. The Theme Distribution chart (Table 6.1) is used to gauge the differences between participants, and does not reflect a distribution within each individual interview as the number of codes in each theme is inconsistent.

Themes %	P4	P2	P1	P3	P5
In-group	50.00%	55.56%	44.19%	75.00%	45.24%
Out-group	29.41%	27.78%	32.56%	12.50%	26.19%
Savviness	16.18%	11.11%	13.95%	12.50%	23.81%
Tribal lens	4.41%	5.56%	9.30%	0.00%	4.76%

Table 6.1 Theme Distribution

6.2 In-group expression, differences between tribes

All participants exhibit various levels of inclination towards their identity within the “in-group”, either by differentiating themselves from other groups or by leaning into the community of their tribe. As such there are several similarities and differences in the way participants utilise themes and codes in these interviews. The analysis of participants' adherence, differences, and similarities suggests that these factors likely have a significant impact on their understanding and responses to a range of memes and subjects.

Participant 1 displays a strong loyalty to their tribe, comparing their adherence to this group to rooting for a football team - “You can’t just switch [teams]” (Appendix 5, p. 63). Still, the participant is open to engaging with others on the political spectrum, and regularly does so. This is a telling example of the theme of “in-group identity and dynamics”, as the participants' tribe values inclusion in terms of openness towards other groups, but it is made clear that their tribe is the right fit for this particular participant. Each participant expresses this strong adherence and unwillingness to join a differently affiliated political association, with the exception of Participant 5. Although Participant 5 did not claim loyalty to the same degree as other participants, there was significant focus on building social and cultural capital for the tribe as shown by the participants' view on memes as means to build social or cultural capital (Code #10).

Code #10 is informed by Fang (2018), positioning memes as a possible form of cultural capital. It highlights how participants use memes, or their relationships to memes, to reinforce their own or their group’s identity. By sharing memes that are aligned with the tribe’s values, participants can gain recognition, social connections and establish a cultural competence. This

code emphasises memes' importance in online (or partly online) communities, playing a role in gaining validation and symbolic currency, which is especially apparent in Participant 5.

Participant 4 also mentions cultural capital in several instances. In contrast to participant 5, this is done in relation to their group, first by distancing themselves from memes, saying they do not understand or use them, claiming they are all "40-year old moms and dads" (Appendix 5, p. 96), setting them apart from other tribes in a way that indicates they are superior, creating a common identity for their tribe. Once Participant 4 realises their tribe's fairly frequent use of memes, the participant begins to understand how integral meme creation and sharing is to their identity. The exclusivity of these memes, which are likely incomprehensible to outsiders, becomes a source of pride, showcasing their groupishness.

Memes are used by all the participants in relation to various political activities, such as marketing the party during elections, or as protests. They often contain inside jokes or references that only those involved in the tribe or activity would likely understand. Understanding, and consequently sharing, these types of memes can signal a deep involvement in the tribe. Participant 2, although not as expressive, also mentions the specific memes that are created within and with references of a department. These very internal memes are co-created within a closed community as an indication of one's belonging, however the individual proficiency or expertise in meme-use can arguably also lead to an accumulation of social capital.

While building social or cultural capital is merited, memes are similarly expressed to be something that builds community as indicated by Participants 2 and 4. In these cases, humour plays a critical role in meme propagation, which aligns with Laineste & Voolaid's (2017) claim that humour creates a sense of community, and Haidt's (2013) Hive Switch where synchronicity is a trigger.

6.2.1 Distinguishing the tribe

Participant 2 sees themselves, and their tribe, as a form of opposite to that of Participant 5. Nonetheless, Participant 2 positively acknowledges humour that is targeting opposing tribes rather than their own. Although this participant does not find Meme 4 amusing, they concede its objective merit. While they continuously express loyalty to their tribe, they suggest a readiness to change affiliations if the social adherence is diminished. This hints at their political interest being

secondary to their tribal commitment, even though the values of the tribe and the social aspects are currently sound.

Conversely to Participant 1, Participant 4 takes pride in distinguishing their group from others, expressing reluctance to even compliment other tribes although the participant recognises a positive trait in an out-group, in several instances leading a compliment with “I hate to say it, but...” (Appendix 5, p. 97, 101). Participant 4 is thus implying that the in-group feels superior to the others, although the participant is more exclusive when it comes to right wing politics than the left wing counterpart. While this participant is critical of those not within the tribe, the tribe itself is also highly valued as shown in the use of memes as a way of bolstering. Here are two translated quotes from Participant 4 to exemplify this use of memes within the tribe:

“[...] The cashier of Young Left sent a meme that said “This barbie is writing a budget” during the budgeting days, which made it fun.” (Participant 4, Appendix 5, p. 96)

“When we sing Internationalen, we all stand up” (Participant 4, Appendix 5, p. 106)

However, in-group adherence in a tribe may also be based almost exclusively on out-group rejection, as illustrated by Participant 3 both in open conversation and in reacting to memes in the elicitation material. Despite the limitations of expression and depth this interview faced, compared to the others, their strong and frequent us-and-them mentality (see Table 6.3 for comparison between participants) demonstrated rejection of out-groups as a way of increasing their adherence to their own tribe. The limitations of this particular interview are in line with Bryman (2011) who claims feelings of anxiety could negatively effect the interviewee, granting poor results. Participant 3 is nonetheless adamant in the expression of rejection of other groups. This is apparent when examining the distribution of codes within the interviews, where code #3, “Us-and-them” makes up over 30 % of Participant 3’s total coded instances, where only one other participant exceeded 10 %. Even the motivations for being part of the tribe is based on “us-and-them” for Participant 3, claiming that other political factions than their own, and media as a whole, utilises systematic lying in their communication, albeit no explicit example was given. This further strengthens the idea that this particular participant is inclined towards content that rejects other ideologies than what the tribe holds.

P4	P2	P1	P3	P5
19.40%	8.57%	9.30%	31.25%	4.88%

Table 6.3. Distribution of Code #3 “Us-and-them” in total amount of codes.

This table shows the frequency of indications of us-and-them rhetoric for each participant. This is not meant as a quantitative exemplification, but a chance to visualise how much emphasis each participant puts on this specific code.

6.2.2 Idolisation memes

The one clear idolisation meme that was included (Meme 4, Appendix 1d) in the elicitation generated varied reactions, but the results indicate a less polarising effect than that of the attack variety of memes. Idolisation memes surely have an internal intention, but participants did not need to sympathise with Ulf Kristersson or the political party he represents to have a positive reaction. The only negative reaction was from Participant 4, who explained the negative reaction as an aversion to "sexualising" a politician, or making the politician out to be an influencer. This strong reaction was not due to being offended by the Swedish Prime Minister's calves per se, but rather a generalised reaction towards the issues the participant put forth. The emotional significance of a brand can shape how much attention and elaboration it garners (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). In this case, Participant 4's reaction to Meme 4 was not focused on the opposing politician portrayed, but rather on a more generally applicable phenomenon. This reaction was possibly informed by the participant's past experiences with the opposition, as other political associations than their own are also brought up negatively in that sense. As it stands, this participant's reaction seems to be a disconnect from the findings of Martynyuk & Meleshchenko (2022) where negative depictions of a political figure is what fosters negative opinions.

On the other hand, Participants 1, 2, and 5 had clear positive reactions, which speaks for positive depictions of political figures could conversely foster a positive image. Participant 3 interpreted the meme as “töntig”, which roughly translates to “dorky”, but acknowledged its potential for positive impact in its main target audience. The reaction of Participant 3 nonetheless indicated a fairly positive reaction to the meme, albeit not as strong as Participant 1, 2 and 5. It is thus arguable that idolisation memes such as Meme 4 can elicit a depoliticising effect, which

gains support from Fang (2018) who claims that the memification of a political figure may turn them into a cultural symbol instead.

It is noteworthy in the case of Participant 4 that the party leader for their association's parent-party is not idolised in a similar manner to how Ulf Kristersson is in Meme 4. While still being a figure they looked up to it was made clear that the tribe Participant 4 is part of had their own culture that aimed to be separate from the parent-party, something that set them apart from many of the other groups.

6.2.3 Activating the hive switch

The hive switch is triggered differently for each participant, particularly as demonstrated by their reactions and reflections concerning memes. It is important to emphasise that all participants express loyalty to their respective tribes to various degrees.

Participant 4 activated the hive switch by singing songs to foster a sense of belonging within the tribe, which arguably makes participating individuals feel as part of a larger whole. This participant's engagement in meme-sharing within the tribe during a bus trip after a protest in Germany highlights how memes can foster unity within a group. Throughout the interview, the participant demonstrated various ways in which memes are used for both inclusion and exclusion purposes. The specific memes on the bus trip are an expression of exclusivity, as other groups would not be able to grasp the appeal. Similarly, Participant 2 demonstrates a particular inclination towards in-group tribal meme usage by considering the Young Greens TikTok account to be relevant and funny, although an onlooker outside the tribe may have difficulty decoding the appeal of those memes.

There is an apparent connection between Participants 1 and 2 in their respective hive switch activations, where they both condemn deviant behaviour akin to Haidt's (2013) religious perspective on the hive switch. While similar in their approach, these two participants are fundamentally different in terms of how they react to out-groups. Where Participant 1 seeks to include other groups or defend them, Participant 3 exhibits a more functionalist approach to their values, rejecting those who do not share them. This is particularly made clear as Participant 3 expresses distrust or disinterest in other groups.

While Participant 5 may not exhibit particular signs to indicate hive switch activation, this participant does emphasise the importance of creating content that is engaging for a wide

audience. This may be a way for the participant to attempt activating the hive switch in others, as the impact of memes is acknowledged as effective but with the caveat that it is untested territory.

6.2.3 Change of mind

Reaction dissonance (Code #7) captures the confusion or dissonance participants display when confronted with impressions that challenge their tribal belonging or interpretations, or make them alter their reactions to confirm their tribe's values.

This is exemplified by Participant 1 who initially reacts with amusement at Meme 2 (Appendix 1b), then realising it does not align with the values of their tribe, corrects the reaction and instead becomes offended. The reactions do not appear performative, so it can be concluded that this change of mind was genuine in all participants. Participant 5 expresses how Meme 2 is humorous, but upon reflecting on the topic infers that the value of the meme is considerably lower than the initial reaction reflected. This instance of reaction dissonance aligns with the looser connection Participant 1 holds to their tribe in comparison to the others.

However, this type of reaction is slightly inconsistent as Participant 2 goes the opposite way when interpreting Meme 1 (Appendix 1b). While initially being offended by the meme and expressing concern about the consequences of that type of rhetoric, she then says that it was “a bit” funny after all. In this case, the participant appears to gain a distance from their initial reaction through reasoning and reflecting. This is the only participant who changed their mind from negative to positive, as every other instance of reaction dissonance was initially positive, then changed as the participant takes in the perceived message of the meme and aligns it with their tribal affiliation.

6.3 Out-group dynamics and identity

Out-group dynamics and identity consists of three codes, code #2 tribalism out-group, code #4 across the border, and code #8, interpretation space. This theme explores the knowledge of, and ability to relate to another group, as well as reasoning around the ambiguity in a meme with the possibility to identify different perspectives. As each participant was frequently asked to consider the meaning of a meme they had been elicited, they often had the opportunity to reflect on other perspectives to derive their perspective and notion of other tribes and their respective values and behaviours. It could be argued that the out-group dynamics and identity theme speaks

against the existence of tribalism, but participants have expressed understanding of another group in the same sentence as they express clear in-group behaviour. This means that in-group dynamics and out-group dynamics are not necessarily opposites, but rather nuances of a reasoning around politics and tribes. Participant 1 claims important values within their group include behaving in an inclusive way towards other groups, and consequently shows the highest distribution of out-group dynamics (see Table 6.2). This participant shared an elicited meme to a political opponent during the interview, and also became defensive by some elicited attack-memes on behalf of other political groups. It may seem contradictory to tribalism, but the participant was adamant in the fact that inclusivity and cooperation across the different political groupings was central to their tribal adherence and to the association in which the participant belongs.

Participant 4 discusses the experience of maintaining friendships with individuals from other parties on the same political spectrum, as well as friendly rivalry, and even engaging with a party in the middle of the spectrum. Despite the exclusivity otherwise expressed around their tribe, this participant exhibits a relatively normal distribution on the out-group theme (see Table 6.2). This observation interacts interestingly within the theme, as the application of interpretation space (code #8) was expected to be considerably more common in participants who had a high distribution of out-group dynamics and identity. Participant 1, who frequently interacts with the out-group, found no room for interpretation in ambiguous memes, claiming their origins and meanings were obvious. Conversely, Participants 2 and 4 applied their tribal lens when examining ambiguous memes, but were still able to entertain other perspectives to some extent. Way (2021) argues that memes are driven more by emotion than logic, which raises the question of how this affects the room for interpretation. When prompted to consider alternative viewpoints and develop their impressions, participants could entertain interpretations that might not have crossed their minds had they simply scrolled past the memes. However, this was not a universal finding among all participants, and the participants' individual analytical ability is a factor in addition to their tribal lens.

6.4 Meme savviness

While memes are commonly associated with humorous content, participants also expressed their use in politics, indicating that the definition of a meme extends beyond being a

source of entertainment. There were no participants that objected to something elicited to them not being a meme, and mentioned a variety of memes circulating on different mediums. Most participants considered memes to be something funny, with varying degrees of usefulness. Participant 2 is the only one to not explicitly assert that memes are intrinsically of a humorous nature to some extent. Participants also had clear opinions of what constitutes high or low quality in memes, commenting on the use of pictures, suggesting others, sometimes the editing of memes or other improvements. It also appeared participants had a fairly high awareness of memes as a means of communication, reflecting over their own or other party's use of memes as marketing, and the memes as something that could strengthen a group within.

There was also a use of memes that seemed almost subconscious, Participant 4 was adamant that they did not use memes at all, it was only later in the interview that a strong meme culture within their group was revealed, and that they used it often. Participants reflected little over their use of memes among friends, Participant 3 noting that it was useful for staying in contact but no one reflected over how it might affect their communication.

During the elicitation process, it became evident that a meme's origin influenced its interpretation and the recipient's attitude towards it. Initially, Participant 4 believed that Meme 7 (Appendix 1g) was created by a right-wing individual, but upon discovering that it originated from someone in the Left Party, they found it perfectly logical. The participant's understanding of other groups' behaviours was biased, yet they were not surprised when presented with a contradictory source.

There appeared to be a difference in the use of external and internal memes where Participants 2 and 4, who are anchored to the left-wing, had a higher use of internal memes within the specific group. Participant 4 participates in internal meme-threads and Participant 2 has party-members who create internal meme-accounts, often directed to groups or departments within the party. These memes are not necessarily using the same formats that are common in mainstream social media, and may not appear to be a meme by outsiders. This is because those memes refer to internal events and use formats or images that are only circulated within the group. For instance, Participant 4's party shared memes depicting a person they had met at an event which makes it unintelligible for an outsider. The interview showed the left-wing parties were not as active with the external use of memes. Their official social media account used a few memes which garnered little engagement. The participants were aware of the potential of memes

as a marketing tool but reported there being little interest within the party to dedicate time to this, or that it would be difficult.

Participant 5 on the right wing party had a very high awareness of memes as a marketing tool, had been a part of creating memes to spread awareness around their party, and appeared to also be proud of their participation there. While their usage was with intention to gain exposure, it was clear that it also had an internal function similar to what can be observed in the participants in the left-wing, but less exclusive. What could be construed from Participant 5 was that memes were to a lesser extent being used to connect to activities within the tribe.

Participants 2 and 4 expressed less certainty in how to use memes as a marketing tool, and Participant 4 was adamant their party did not know how to use it. They did however, along with Participant 3, see the potential of memes as a marketing-strategy, assessing certain memes as more or less efficient. Participant 4 also expressed caution against meme marketing, claiming there are memes that obviously tried and failed to appeal to a younger generation for commercial purposes, but came across as inauthentic (Appendix 5 p. 96).

The right wing participants were vague about their use of memes within a closed group, but did actively share memes with friends, either as a means of staying in contact or when a meme was found to be particularly funny. Participants consumed memes from various sources, with most found on Swedish social media channels or shared among friends, but Participant 3 conversely reported using international sites such as 4chan. All participants shared memes mainly with friends of the same political tribe, with the exception of Participant 1 and 3 who shared memes with non-political friends to a greater extent.

Participant 5 also appeared proud in having created popular memes, noting that they generated engagement, as well as approval “*But in youth organisations, it means a lot, as you can get some recognition there*” (Appendix 5, p. 110) and although they went back and forth on their opinion of the potential of memes, there was some thought that approval of memes could eventually translate to support of the party. Participant 4 noted that an acquaintance had joined a youth party because they found the memes posted on social media funny and could relate to the opinions they expressed. However, this membership was temporary.

6.5 Tribal lens

The theme Tribal lens refers to the interpretation of memes that aligns with the tribe's values and is an ongoing theme throughout the interviews, which makes it an important tool in relaying the interpretation and possible bias of a participant. This theme is emergent from a single code (Code #9), as Thompson (2022) notes, can in rare cases encapsulate a central feature in the data. The varying degrees of ambiguity in the elicitation material allows participants to in some cases apply their tribal lens and in others perceive space for interpretations that do not align with their own. However, when the tribal lens is applied, the participant interprets a meme as a specific meaning in relation to the participants tribal adherence and ambiguity and other perspectives are deprioritised. It was observed in the interviews that the same meme could be interpreted through the tribal lens in opposing ways by opposing groups.

Opposing groups interpreting the same meme as an attack against their respective tribe, can be seen in Participant 1 and 2 when reacting and reflecting on Meme 3 and 5. In these cases, the participants were aware of what critical portrayal of their tribe could look like and went into a defensive position. Participant 4 on the other hand, interpreted most memes in their party's favour. In the case of Meme 5, the participant picked up on "Södermalm" as a reference to the left-wing, but did not acknowledge how the critique could possibly apply to them, consequently causing dissonance and confusion. Likewise, other participants were triggered by words and references, Participant 2 and 5 were both triggered by the word "elite" or references to it. The interviews indicated that participants were more likely to interpret a meme as an attack against themselves if there was enough ambiguity for that interpretation to occur. However, the sender of a meme would allow an indication of how it should be interpreted by the receiver, as with Meme 1 being a video posted by the Young Moderates.

7. Discussion

7.1 Defining a successful meme

The recipe for a successful meme still remains a mystery. Simply put, internet-culture often has an element of absurdity, and seemingly small and unimportant comments can unexpectedly develop into a popular meme, as exemplified with Ulf Kristersson's calves in Meme 4. In order to provide clarity on the use, function, and potential of memes in tribal communities, a definition for what constitutes a successful meme is necessary. Diverging from previous studies, such as Malodia et al., (2022), this study does not equate the success of a meme solely with virality. However, virality is a potential outcome of success resulting from the application of relevance, humour, and tribalism in the meme. This section proposes that a meme achieves success when it significantly impacts and circulates within its intended community, irrespective of community size.

Relevance - Relevance plays a fundamental role in understanding memes in this context. Memes are often reactions to current events (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017) , with templates and expressions re-used or tailored to specific contexts. If a meme depicts a topic that is not current, nor can reflect a current event, it risks not attaining a novelty level that appeals to the meme-consumer. Participant 5 expressed Meme 6 as humorous and moderately applicable for use in their tribe, however the relevance was lacking as it was old and the participant had difficulty recognising the depicted person. Conversely, Participant 4 viewed the same meme with reverence, as there seemed to be an extended relevance period in the topic as it was of a tribal nature. Meme 6 thus signalled relevance, funny and tribalism for the participant, and the meme was well achieved. Malodia et al (2022) claims relevance relates to content familiarity, which explains the prevalence of certain references.

Humour - A funny meme is more likely to be shared (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015; Malodia et al., 2022). What is considered good humour is highly subjective and what one tribe finds humour, may be offensive to another. This was observed in the participants' assessments of their various political social media channels.

Humour does not only require skills in delivering a joke, or knowledge about the community, but accurate understanding of internet humour as well (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

Tribal - A meme cannot be circulated within or across communities if it does not appeal to the tribe's concept of reality, as exemplified by Participant 3 and their reaction to Meme 2. The participant expressed that the topic in the meme was relevant, and acknowledged that it had a humorous element, but claimed it was uninteresting in terms of sharing as it instead was more applicable for another tribe (Appendix 5, p. 88). While memes lean into emotional arguments, these are not taken out of thin air, but rely on concepts developed in their communities. Participant 4 noted that memes applied in commercial contexts can appear to lack authenticity, which points to a lack of appeal in generalised content for a person who otherwise relies on inside jokes and internal meme usage.

7.2 Tribal interpretations

From the interviews conducted in this study, it is evident that memes can be appreciated or understood in both similar and different ways, even between opposing tribes. However, the tribal lens is often involved when high levels of ambiguity are present in a meme. It is therefore critical to acknowledge this ambiguity, and how it may incline a meme consumer towards interpretation in favour of their tribe through their tribal lens.

In the context of political memes, there exists a purpose in the design which is to elicit a response from meme-consumers inside or outside of a political tribe. Similarly to how Way (2021) reasons on how emotional content takes priority over sharing information, this tribal meme-response is largely based on the inclination of the tribe itself rather than the content of the meme. Emotional attachment to tribes varies between individuals, but there may be a pattern that can be observed in how these emotions are displayed. Participant 4, who is part of Young Left association, was the only one to completely reject the idolisation meme (Appendix 1d) featuring Ulf Kristersson, party leader of The Moderates. Consequently, this participant is ideologically the furthest away from The Moderates. This suggests that memes are not only produced as manifestations of internal tribal culture, but are consumed as such too. Specifically, Participants 1 and 2 often felt targeted by the memes, whereas Participant 4 frequently interpreted them as attacks against their political opponents. A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be a

shared idea within a tribe, that there is an expectation of the type of criticism being circulated, and to whom it is directed. If Participant 4 has not experienced criticism towards their party as elitist in the past, the references may be harder to process. As observed in the analysis, the sender of the meme will offer some indication of how memes can or should be perceived. However, the ambiguity of a meme still means it can develop into something else entirely, which may be the reason political memes with party affiliations often post memes with little interpretative space.

While interpretation space can be affected by tribal values, the reception of a meme is affected by this in cases where the message is clear, as with Meme 1 (Appendix 1a). Participant 1 was initially amused (Appendix 5, p. 68), indicating the humour could be understood, but swiftly changed their mind to express offence, aligning with the tribe's values. Although humour improved Participant 2's perception of Meme 1 (Appendix 5, p. 80), tribal interpretations appear to take precedence. This precedence of tribal interpretations is particularly evident in some responses of Participants 1 and 2, but can be observed less obviously in Participant 4.

Strategically implementing controversies in politics is a sound strategy for reaching a large spread on social media, according to Francia (2018), and that notion is particularly visceral when observing Participant 4. If the tribal culture allows or encourages attack-memes it may also be the case that they reject any idolisation of oppositional groups. This observation can also be surmised from Participant 3, who represents Young Swedes, not in the sense that a meme did not elicit a strong negative reaction, but it was instead described as dorky and possibly useful for internal use within The Moderates youth group, who posted the meme. However, the implication that can be inferred from Participant 3's otherwise hostile view on other tribes, and the comparably lenient view on The Moderates, and Meme 4 (Appendix 1d), is that there may be an inclination to reject idolisation memes of left-wing party representatives. This particularly highlights the need for more research in the interpretation of idolisation memes in members of oppositional tribes.

7.3 Utilising the tribal lens

To create a successful meme, it must cater to the target group's culture, preferences, and worldview. By incorporating these three elements, a meme can effectively resonate within a tribe, which can according to Vasile's (2021) serve as both means of cultural connection and a promotion mechanism for the group's identity. This alignment with values and culture is notably

influenced by tribal affiliation, which underscores the polarising effects of memes. It is essential to understand how tribal perspectives shape the interpretation of memes within individual tribes to recognize these effects.

Ulf Kristersson, depicted in Meme 4 (Appendix 1d), and Magdalena Andersson, mentioned by Participants 1, 2, 4, and 5, both represent Sweden and Swedish politics. Their wide relevance and frequent media scrutiny makes them suitable meme-subjects. Memes featuring these figures are accessible to weak affiliates and strong tribal members alike, but the understanding of these memes cannot only be attributed to political knowledge, but to internet culture. A political affiliation to The Moderates might appreciate Ulf Kristersson as a leader, but not grasp the meme as they may not be knowledgeable in internet or meme-culture. However, it is notable that idolisation in memes signifies a desire for a representative symbol while also allowing scrutiny and criticism from opposing tribes, as supported by Fang (2018) where memes of political figures may gain symbolic value within a culture. This study suggests tribes can use the idolisation of out-groups to reinforce their own cohesion. Understanding these themes allows for better navigation of cultural complexities in terms of memes. This knowledge helps to accurately identify suitable memes for different tribes and contexts.

7.4 The function of memes in tribalistic groups

7.4.1 Defining external and internal memes

Based on the interviews and research conducted, it is theorised that memes serve different internal and external functions. External memes are present on social media platforms and contain references that can be comprehended by multiple groups. In the elicitation process, all memes can be classified as external as they could be deciphered not only by the researchers but also by people with some knowledge about the subject matter, which in this case is Swedish politics. They may also contain references to mainstream pop-culture.

On the other hand, internal memes are created and shared within a specific group and include references and frames that can only be understood within that group. These memes refer to local or internal events and may not seem like a meme to outsiders. They are usually shared among closed groups. While external memes may have internal functions, internal memes do not appear to have any functions outside of their respective group.

7.4.2 The External Meme

In this study it was observed that external memes serve several functions, among them gaining exposure or sympathy for a brand, publically signalling a tribe's values through entertaining content. As noted in the analysis, especially attack-memes play an important role in this manner, as they elicit strong reactions of amusement or outrage. As Way (2021) observed, memes are inclined towards emotional arguments, and the reception and judgement of memes in the interviews appear intuitive. This concept of intuition in social interaction is further iterated in the social persuasion link within Haidt's (2013) intuitionist model, where impressions and information processed and judged intuitively. Every meme used in the elicitation in this study references real life events, people, or groups. This was considered more or less true by different participants in this study, and reliably triggered an intuitive reaction in line, or corrected to, that of the tribe. As observed in the interview, participants were not of the opinion that their own judgement was affected by memes, but in the case where the attack-memes appeared untrue or exaggerated to a participant, there was concern for the effect and fairness. Memes often refer to simplified versions of reality where important nuance may be lost, such as the case with Meme 1 or Meme 2 (Appendix 1b, and 1b). These can nonetheless appear as accurate reflections of reality for participants, such as Participant 3 and the interpretation to Meme 1 as a way of reaching a larger audience with hyperbole.

Attack-memes, just as external memes, feature in-group themes, strengthening the tribe through out-group rejection and humour. With Meme 1 (Appendix 1a), Participant 5 admits it is bad while simultaneously laughing at it and although Participants 1 and 2 are offended by the meme, they are partially amused (albeit Participant 1 denies this). Attack-memes are a simple way of conveying humour in memes while simultaneously adhering to the tribe's values and activating emotions, which explains their prevalence during this study. While there is communicative potential for memes in political discourse, and even non-nuanced attack- and idolisation memes can be appreciated by political opponents (Appendix 5. p. 72, 112), their importance appears to be primarily internal and symbolic rather than promoting dialogue.

Participant 3 reports using memes sourced from international websites, and claim that the "left can't meme", referencing a loose right wing movement in the US. When reviewing that statement with the Swedish context in mind, it is evident that the Swedish and North American left wing are two different political movements, and uncritically applying the "left can't meme"

concept suggests a polarising influence from American social media and meme-culture. This aligns with Way's (2022) scepticism of memes in political discourse and highlights how Participant 3 has been influenced by emotional appeal which subsequently has affected their perception of Swedish politics.

7.4.3 Memes and marketing value

The idolisation meme depicting Ulf Kristersson (Meme 4, Appendix 1d) is appreciated by Participant 2, who adheres to the Young Green, who is an opposing political group to Ulf Kristersson. This shows it is possible for a diverse audience to enjoy this meme which potentially propels its spreading, but also makes it possible to be interpreted and appreciated differently not only outside but within the tribe. Some may share the meme with the intention of honouring their political symbol, while others might do so ironically. The creation and sharing of memes can also serve as a coping mechanism for individuals experiencing stress or anxiety (Adan & Howard, 2022; Myrick et al., 2022). While trending memes can point at underlying anxiety, they may well be reactions to current events (Laineste & Voolaid 2017), such as Meme 6 (Appendix 1f) being a comment on controversial statements of politicians. Analysing the reasons for the popularity of a particular meme can be a complex process, as it may reflect varying intentions and values within the same community. As Fang (2018) claims, memes that are originally political may lose their political message through their cultural or tribal significance. While idolisation memes depicting political leaders can form as branding promoting loyalty and brand love (Banerjee & Chaudhuri, 2022), interviews suggest it does not work for all parties, such as for the young greens (Appendix, 3 p.82). This emphasises that while relevance is an important component in a successful meme, other requirements must also be fulfilled.

Way (2021) notes that memes have the potential to influence political actions like voting, but are limited in terms of changing opinions. As such, their political power lies in their ability to address and appeal to already existing opinions, attitudes, prejudices, values etc. Idolisation memes can therefore be construed to serve an internal function, but a marketing function can also be seen in the way Meme 4 is received positively by several participants. The perceived marketing value of both idolisation and attack memes is also indicated in several instances by Participant 2, 4, and 5. A single meme might not significantly alter an individual's perception or

political views; however, exposure to multiple memes conveying a similar message could be more influential, as even brief encounters with memes can produce temporary effects (Geniole et al., 2022). Not excluding the possibility of changing an individual's opinion over time, the interviews align with Way's (2021) claim that memes strengthen and promote already existing opinions, attitudes and suspicions with individuals or within a group.

This brings us back to Geniole's (2022), and how memes can change opinions, although the effects of memes in that particular study is limited. Future studies should explore the effect of meme's on opinions over an extended amount of time, and the effect of an individual's or group's perception of something that is depicted on memes. Not excluding the possibility of changing an individual's opinion, the interviews align with Way's (2021) claim that memes strengthen and promote already existing opinions, attitudes and suspicions with individuals or within a group.

7.4.4 The Internal Meme

This study has observed that internal memes play a more significant effect within the communities of Participant 2 and 4, who are both of left-wing political adherence. While other participants use memes externally, they differ in their degree of exclusivity. It must be stressed that by these observations of internal memes, they cannot feasibly be used outside of the community. Participant 4's recalled internal events and feelings of togetherness through the use of internal memes, seemingly prolonging and amplifying the feelings of togetherness. Fang's (2018) theory of memes as cultural capital is relevant in the case with external memes, but possibly even more so with internal memes. The engagement with these memes can distinguish an individual within the group, highlighting the level of their inclusion or engagement in the tribe.

Furthermore, internal memes allow for more freedom of expression as they don't have to conform to an outward image. As co-creation with a target group allows fostering a deeper emotional connection (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018) and humour has been highlighted as a type of bonding (Laineste and Voolaid 2017). Recalling events and referencing specifics can also promote a sense of exclusivity and belonging is seemingly organic in the process of internal meme usage. Specific synchronous behaviours create or strengthen internal cohesion within a group (Haidt, 2013), which is observed in several participants and can be clearly exemplified in

Participant 4. This participant expressed memes derived from shared experiences, events and values that had been cultivated within the tribe in a wide variety of ways, such as singing songs, marching and sharing memes. Looking at online movements (Miller 2011) or the use of memes in support groups (Howard & Adan, 2022) memes can help shape or highlight conversations, creating groups and movements. In Howard's and Adan's (2022) study, the memes could be considered internal, focusing on shared experiences and knowledge within the group. Members of a group or tribe can share experiences of a political situation or trauma through memes, which connects appropriate individuals. The subject matter was brought, amplified, and prolonged by memes, but ultimately they need a source, as well as tribal engagement needs to be cultivated with actions and social connections outside simply consuming memes. Creating an online community connected only through memes can be possible, but risks are the in-group adherence is weak or the movement temporary.

7.5 Meme culture

There are cultural differences in how memes are anchored to the participants in this study. Participants 1 and 3 primarily use memes for social purposes rather than within their political parties, while Participants 2 and 4 use internal memes within their tribes. Participant 5 uses memes for social purposes or marketing externally. It is also noted that Participant 2 and 4 doubt their party's ability to use meme-marketing effectively, but the efforts of party 2's on official social media accounts does not have much engagement, indicating it does not resonate with the tribe. While it cannot be ruled out, the possibility of political youth associations lacking comprehensive knowledge or skills regarding memes or marketing, indications that meme-cultures develop differently within different tribes were observed, and the engagement to internal memes are not easily transferable to meme-marketing/branding.

Observations indicate authenticity is a factor in meme reception, supported by Participant 4 who claims to easily spot inauthentic memes, and by Participant 1 who is unhappy with certain memes as they aren't close enough to reality (such as Meme 2, Appendix 1b). Authenticity can be understood both to adherence to the group's values or humour, as well as the intention behind the meme. If the meme does not fit into the brand of the originator, or with the culture of memes, it appears inauthentic. This aligns with Kaur & Sohal (2018) conclusion, that the communication align with the voters perception of the brand, as well as Shifman's (2013) emphasis on memes as

cultural units, in this case medium's of internet humour (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017) as a culture. Failure to immerse oneself in this culture will lead to lack of understanding of how to use memes and which context they are appropriate (exemplified with a meme in Image 7.1). Participant 4 could not pinpoint precisely what makes a meme appear inauthentic. However, their intuitive recognition of such inauthenticity emphasises the importance of understanding internet-culture - there are nuances that people unfamiliar with the culture might find challenging or impossible to grasp.



Image 7.1: “How do you do, fellow kids?” indicates a generational disconnect. 30 Rocky.

Malodie et al.,(2022) recognizes that memes are units of internet culture, and authenticity is briefly mentioned by Banerjee & Chaudhuri (2022) in relation to brand trust, but is otherwise not discussed in the context of memes.

Humour again becomes relevant here. What is considered funny in mainstream meme-culture or within tribes is arbitrary and sometimes bizarre, and as noted by Laineste & Voolaid (2017) memes are carriers of internet humour. A political party is required to discuss serious subjects, and are held accountable for their statements and overall project a serious image, this does not always translate well into meme-culture. It presents a challenge when looking to use memes as a marketing strategy and may result in poor results as they would struggle to resonate with the tribe or fit their brand/tone of voice. External social media accounts

with political content and memes do not have a similar responsibility nor expectations to produce a certain type of content, and can instead use memes in a way that efficiently appeals to their targets. In some cases these memes may fill the demand for political memes - as seen with Participant 1 and 3.

7.6 Rejecting memes

Some tribes value rejecting other groups, while others demonstrate understanding towards out-groups and sympathise with other tribes when targeted by attack memes. Participant 3 pridefully expressed visceral rejection of left-wing affiliates (Appendix 5, p. 92), while Participant 1 in response to Meme 1 (Appendix 1a) suggested a more inclusive approach (Appendix 5, p. 66). The question remains whether this behaviour is another aspect of their tribal adherence, or is anti-tribal, as it doesn't as strongly advocate the tribe compared to other participants, where rejection and exclusivity was more prominent. In the case of Participant 1, the response to attack memes indicates a fundamentally different approach to interpretation that puts the the rejective nature of other tribes into a notable perspective.

The importance of accuracy in meme targeting, and having an explicit purpose for attack or idolisation memes, should thus be considered in terms of the target tribes inclination towards opponents before utilising either approach. The tribal lens theme is therefore a central consideration for target group adaptation in terms of meme usage in a wider sense. A tribe with a defensive mindset towards attack memes may interpret a meme with higher level of ambiguity, such as Meme 3 (Appendix 1c) as an attack against their own group. This is showcased in Participant 1 and 5, who both react towards Meme 3 (Appendix 1c) with an explicit perception of it being an attack on the bourgeoisie, which is a common reference to Swedish right-wing political parties. It was also interpreted by Participant 2 in a similar manner, but against the Green Party which resides on the left-wing of Swedish politics. This lack of immediate reasoning again draws in the social persuasion link, although there are some considerations to be made in terms of how the means or origins may carry a certain meaning for the meme consumer. While the sender of the meme may carry an inherent disposition in terms of tribal adherence, it cannot be guaranteed that a meme is shared through the same tribal channels in each instance.

8. Conclusion

As illustrated in this study, memes serve as complex markers within both virtual and political communities. Their cultural significance and ability to target specific audiences by utilising the theorised phenomena of tribalism highlight their potential as powerful tools for strategic communication. As cultural markers within tribal culture, the interpretation of certain memes indicates the degree of involvement and social capital an individual in the tribe possesses. In this circumstance, the research presented here challenges the notion of virality as the established measure for a successful meme. Instead it is emphasised that effective application of relevance, humour and tribalism in a meme can lead to successful non-viral outcomes as it affects tribalistic groups in their internal structures. However, using memes effectively requires an immersive understanding of both affiliations and opponents of the target demographic, as well as the nuances of contemporary internet culture.

The inherent ambiguity in memes can lead to a broad spectrum of reactions, sometimes diverging from the original intent or even evoking negativity. Therefore, meme creation and dissemination intended for a specific group should be mindful of the interpretation space that comes with meme ambiguity, and utilise the tribal lens to effectively communicate. It is ambiguity that allows versatile use across different contexts, potentially influencing the perception of real-life situations. Further exploration of this aspect in future studies is warranted.

Political memes have been classified into four categories: attacking, idolising, internal, and external. These categories facilitate a nuanced understanding of the political meme environment and its influence on group dynamics by acknowledging the importance and impact of non-viral memes. However, the success of a meme relies on identifying and activating three markers: relevance, humour and tribalism. When a meme-consumer triggers these three markers, the meme will be considered good. The complexity of the political meme environment necessitates further research, particularly in understanding the variations in attack and idolization memes and the cultural literacy required to interpret them in internal settings. To unlock the full potential of memes as strategic tools in political communication, an in-depth knowledge of the specific group and broader internet culture is critical. Such understanding is key to fully grasp the cultural, social, and political implications of meme usage within tightly knit groups, thereby contributing to the discourse in this fascinating field.

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