



**MEME CULTURE  
AS POLITICAL PROPAGANDA IN  
THE DONALD TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN**





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## INTRODUCTION

If you use the Internet regularly, then you have most certainly interacted with memes. Memes are becoming an increasingly common form of communication on the Internet. Communication, by definition, is the imparting of agendas, and those agendas might include political or social topics. However, memes as a concept are far more complex than might initially be apparent. It is a common mistake to attribute the name “meme” to any sort of image or video circulated in the Internet. But for something to be properly defined as a meme, it has to have a number of certain characteristics that make it different from simple viral images or videos. So, what is a meme? What are these certain characteristics, and how do they relate to the methods and topics in which memes are used as a form of communication?

This case study proposes that memes are able to function effectively as propaganda, by influencing an audience's perception of reality through saturating their consumption of media. The cases and theories outlined below present several characteristics endemic to meme culture that make it especially susceptible to be used to spread political agendas. The prime case study examined in this writing will be the 2016 United States presidential election, in which online discourse played a major role both in a national and international scale. It will present an argument that the use of memes during the course of the election altered the audience's perspective towards the candidates, primarily Donald Trump, as well as the election process itself.





## MEME CULTURE: DEFINITION AND EVOLUTION



The word “meme” is a corruption of the Greek-rooted word *mimeme* approximately meaning “imitated thing,” first coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*.<sup>i</sup> Dawkins intended the term to mean an idea, behavior or style that spreads from person to person within a culture. However, with the advent of the Internet age, the term was hijacked to define a separate, more specific phenomenon – the Internet meme. Internet memes, similarly, are amusing or interesting items (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media.<sup>ii</sup>

How does something become a meme? Memes are distinct from viral images or videos in that memes usually require or even encourage audiences to not only share them, but also imitate them to create their own.<sup>iii</sup> There are often intersections; viral images and videos are often imitated by others, metamorphosing into memes. Images, videos and other content often become viral through a large number of people sharing them, but for something to become a meme, it must first be imitated, altered, or parodied. This is defined in the term 'meme culture' – the culture of using memes as a way to communicate ideas and beliefs, as well as channeling creativity. Meme culture, by its very nature, encourages active participation and engagement.

The key characteristic that can be taken from meme culture is the circulative nature of internet memes, and the nature of meme culture that requires audiences to not only share content, but also actively imitate and propagate it. The nature of meme culture encourages audiences to further immerse themselves in order to be 'in' on the joke – to imitate and spread it. This characteristic plays a major role in the intersection between memes and propaganda, which will be discussed further in this study by utilizing Guy Debord's theory of the Spectacle.

## MEME CULTURE AS PART OF THE SPECTACLE

One of the leading theories discussing the distortion of reality through media is the Spectacle, proposed by Guy Debord in his 1967 work *The Society of the Spectacle*. In it, Debord proposed that the consumption of mass media has effectively replaced genuine



human interaction with idealized images; “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”<sup>iv</sup>

The Spectacle is an often capitalistic instrument, with the intent of distracting and/or pacifying the masses, in accordance with Marx's theory of alienation. People begin to live their lives in accordance with how they perceive life should be; what they are shown in media. When man-made images have supplanted reality, it can also be said that humanity's perception of reality is also man-made.

However, Debord also stated that, “The Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.”<sup>v</sup> An image in and of itself has no effect on a human mind – what affects it is how that image is presented, circulated, quantified and commoditized. The social media age has only accelerated this phenomenon. Giants such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have effectively privatized human interaction.

For example, the Guy Fawkes mask, which has been associated online with anti-establishmentarianism and appropriated by anarcho-libertarian groups such as Anonymous, is sold over 100,000 times a year – a welcome addition to Time Warner's annual revenue as the license holders.<sup>vi</sup> The artist behind the Trollface meme, Carlos Ramirez, has made at least \$100,000 in licensing fees and merchandising since 2010.<sup>vii</sup> Earlier this year, the mascot of Wendy's generated a jolt of publicity for the fast food company after its sarcastic and humorous social media persona charmed the Internet community.<sup>viii</sup> In a more recent example, rapper Roadman Shaq's improvised “Man's Not Hot” saw official release last September after becoming a meme, with merchandise also soon following.<sup>ix</sup>

How the Spectacle applies to the function of meme culture as an instrument of propaganda has to do with the characteristics of meme culture outlined in the previous section. The communal nature of meme culture provides a convenient network of people in which they circulate ideas and beliefs. Meme culture has managed to elevate banality into an almost fetishistic commodity, encouraging people to spend time, energy and money to imitate and spread the works of others. It is small wonder that corporate and private entities have begun to exploit the economic value in a system that organically self-propagates images and mascots. What's to say it cannot be similarly exploited for political interests?

## THE RELATION BETWEEN MEMES AND PROPAGANDA



Image 1

US Propaganda in WW II

<https://artifactsjournal.missouri.edu/2012/03/wii-propaganda-the-influence-of-racism/>

The simplest way to begin any comparison between propaganda and most meme formats is their morphological similarity. Here is a 1942 World War II US propaganda poster depicting a Japanese soldier terrorizing an American woman (see image 1) compared to a contemporary meme condemning modern liberalism (see image 2). At first glance, the two forms of media are nearly visually identical. Note the similar basic formats; a dark and ominous image, the large, attention-grabbing text and the use of aesthetically unappealing caricatures in order to demonize the parties perceived as the 'enemy'.



Image 2

Contemporary Propaganda

<https://id.pinterest.com/pin/429741989425213649/>

Do the similarities extend beyond looks? Propaganda is defined as, “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person.”<sup>4</sup> It is a way to spin or sever an audience's perception of reality to accommodate one's political interests. When done well, propaganda taps into our basest instincts and emotions such as fear, pride or anger. It associates those emotions with the images or inflammatory text presented in the propaganda itself, pushing the audience into identifying with the (usually warped and simplistic) worldview it presents.

Similarly, in the split-second world of social media, an image must be able to quickly capture a viewer's attention and emotions in order to go viral. That emotion is spread further by a viewer when they share a meme or add their own creativity into it by creating memes of their own. Relating to the Spectacle, by oversaturating the online landscape with an idea, that idea becomes ingrained in the viewer's psyche. Either the audience is pushed into the position the propagandists want or the issue becomes so trivialized that all discussion regarding it becomes fodder for jokes, and the audience is made unable to respond to it in anything other than apathy. Which of these scenarios happened in the case of the 2016 election?



## INTRODUCING THE CASE: THE DONALD TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Regarding the relations between memes and propaganda, there are few cases as relevant and widely-known as the 2016 US Presidential Election. This election is a moment that, for better or worse, will go down in history simply because its result was so unprecedented. Donald Trump won despite the odds seemingly arrayed against him such as sexual assault accusations, rumors of collusion with foreign powers, and a myriad of public relations flukes. There have been no small number of reasons proposed to explain this victory, such as xenophobia, economic anxiety, to simple bigotry. This case study aims to offer an alternative explanation; that many factors such as contemporary meme culture, online radicalization, and neo-fascism together helped shape this latest upheaval in American politics.

One important point about Trump that will be discussed in this case study is his belligerence. Trump is an outsider to politics. He is unfamiliar with the subtlety and diplomacy required in this field. He is, however, a TV star, and that means that he is accustomed to wanting the spotlight on himself. Trump's tendency to create controversy and offense has painted an image of him as being a person who simply has no interest in caring what other people think. Trump's disparaging remarks towards women, minorities, and political opponents display that he is not a person who obeys propriety or decorum in voicing his opinions. A popularly-repeated praise of Trump by his supporters is that he, "tells it like it is."<sup>xi</sup> Trump says what he likes, when he likes, and those who take offense are viewed as simply in denial of the truth of his statements. Regardless of whether his statements are true or not, Trump is, simply put, a man who is not afraid to offend.

The question, then, is what sort of person would sympathize with these characteristics? There is no doubt that Trump is an aggressive candidate. Therefore, his voters are people who, for whatever reason, believe that this sort of person is the ideal figure for a leader. The logical next step for the Republican Party, then, is to tap into this demographic. The next section will detail exactly how they have accomplished this.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW OF MEMES IN THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN

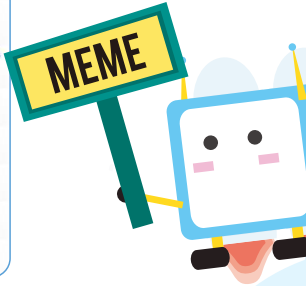
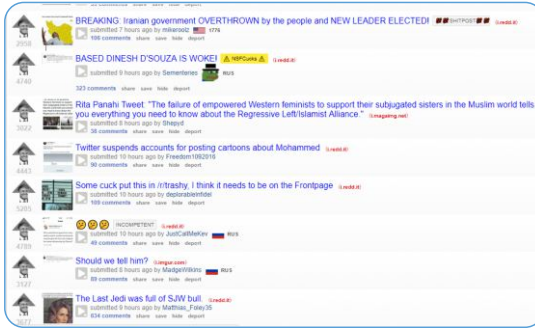


Image 3  
Average lineup of topics on the front page of r/The\_Donald.  
Screenshot taken January 2, 2018.

Any discussion about the spread of memes cannot be separated from the two sites Reddit and 4chan. Reddit is currently the 8<sup>th</sup> most active site on the Internet, with 542 million monthly visitors as of 2017.<sup>xii</sup> Meanwhile, 4chan hosts the more modest but still substantial number of 18 million monthly visitors.<sup>xiii</sup> The influence of these sites, however, is not only owed to their userbases, but also their role as cornerstones of Internet history and culture. 4chan is the birthplace of many early memes such as LOLcats and Rickrolling. Meanwhile, Reddit's large and varied userbase has made it one of the most popular places where memes are propagated, such as on its r/memes and r/dankmemes subforums. Many of the images that are distributed on more commonly-known platforms such as Instagram, Twitter or 9GAG in fact originated on Reddit or 4chan.<sup>xiv</sup>

It is this role that made them two of the hubs of online political discourse during the 2016 US presidential elections. First, we will examine how the election was discussed on Reddit, specifically the Trump supporter subforum r/The\_Donald. However, most of the content in this community is less oriented towards political discussion and more along the lines of simply sharing memes and images praising Trump and disparaging Clinton, the Democratic Party, and the liberal establishment. Its over 380,000 members refer to Trump more similarly to a fictional character than a politician, referring to him with names such as "daddy" and "God Emperor Trump" – more on this will be discussed later in this case study.<sup>xv</sup> This community did not escape the attention of Trump's own campaign. In July 2016, the Trump campaign organized an Ask Me Anything or "AMA" event – a Reddit tradition where public figures go on the site and accept questions from



users for a short time – that attracted over 21,000 visitors.<sup>xvi</sup> This subforum is also not the only pro-Trump subforum on Reddit, with other subforums like r/TheRedPill, r/Mr\_Trump, r/Conservative and r/HillaryForPrison also regularly espousing pro-Trump or pro-Republican content.

In many ways, however, even the ironic and offensive content in the pro-Trump Reddit boards are simply a gateway to the even more inscrutable content created in 4chan. Since it was launched in 2003, 4chan has gradually risen to amass influence that is increasingly disproportionate to its – compared to more mainstream social networking platforms – smaller userbase. Firstly, though, some context is needed regarding the general behavior of the Reddit and 4chan communities. The majority of their users – at least on Reddit, as a large part of 4chan's appeal is its anonymity and its userbase is difficult to quantify – are young white males. It is especially popular among disgruntled gamers, 'geeks' and 'nerds', seeking company and validation in a place where being disdained or avoided by society is seen as a point of pride. Rebelliousness and deviation from the norm is seen as a virtue.

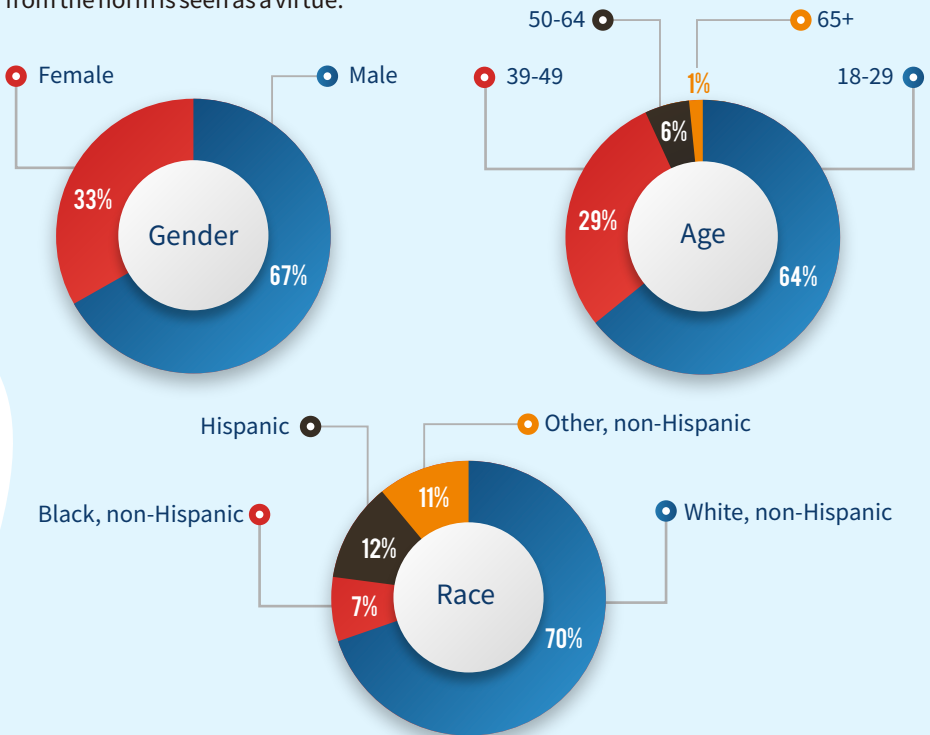
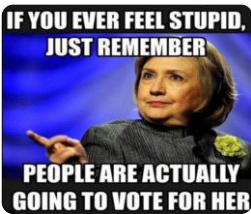


Image 4  
 Percentage of Reddit Userbase by Demography  
<http://www.journalism.org/2016/02/25/reddit-news-users-more-likely-to-be-male-young-and-digital-in-their-news-preferences/>

In 4chan, this desire for rebellion usually manifests in rebelling against what is perceived as the 'normal' establishment. During the conservative Bush administration, for example, 4chan actually skewed more to the left, being a discussion hub for 9/11 conspiracy theories as well as giving birth to the leftist hacker collective Anonymous.<sup>xvii</sup> When the liberal Obama rose to the presidency, however, 4chan's direction skewed to the right in opposition to the more progressive values that started to become popular. When values such as gender equality and racial tolerance started to become more encouraged, 4chan's rebellion manifested in unapologetically racially offensive language and hatred of women; some readers might remember the "Make Me A Sandwich" meme that rose as part of this trend. Most of this is done ironically and simply to channel their frustrations as well as scandalize outsiders, but naturally, this created an environment where actual bigots felt safe and accepted.



*Image 5*  
 Example of Meme on Hillary Clinton  
 Source: <http://mojly.com/34-funny-memes-hillary-clinton-will-make-lol-6344/>

This section will now outline the characteristics of the memes circulated in the above platforms. It should be noted, however, that the circulation of these images are not exclusive to Reddit and 4chan. Much like other memes, the pro-Trump memes and talking points that originate from these sites very often diffuse into more commonly-known platforms such as Facebook, 9GAG and Twitter. Many of the viral images supporting the Trump campaign are simple photos edited to prominently feature catchy, repeatable slogans such as “the Trump Train” and “You Can’t Stump the Trump” (see image 6). Nearly cartoonish in their banality and simplicity, but nonetheless, these images are very actively circulated. The most interesting characteristic about these examples is that their simple, easily-consumed formats to the use of slogans very strongly echo traditional campaign posters. Comparatively, these examples are relatively innocent; the goal seems to be to elicit simple humor and excitement.



*Image 6*  
 Examples of Memes on Donald Trump  
 Source: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/memes-4chan-trump-supporters-trolls-internet-214856>

Next comes the more hostile examples. Many images circulated by Trump's camp also feature content that encourages hatred and insensitivity to political opponents. Many of these images refer to Hillary Clinton with disparaging nicknames such as “Crooked Hillary” – frequently used by Trump himself – as well as “Killary.” They also commonly insult the Democrat or anti-Trump camp with statements devoid of any real criticism towards their stance (see image 7). The more extreme ones, however, encourage more than political hostility. While Trump's platform does not overly encourage racial discrimination, much of his camp's propaganda certainly does. Some examples come from the Facebook page SecuredBorders (see image 9), which, at the time of its closing in 2017, had already amassed a total of about 133,000 followers.<sup>xviii</sup>



Image 7

Examples of Memes by Republican Supporters

Source: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/30-batsht-crazy-mostly-racist-facebook-memes-the-russians-used-to-corrupt-your-mind>

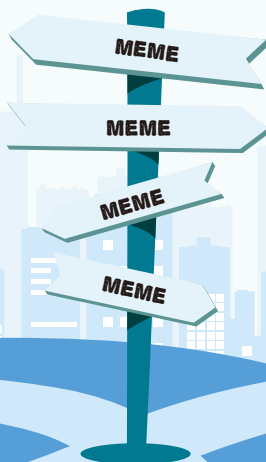




Image 8  
"God Emperor Trump" meme  
Source: <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1020360-donald-trump>



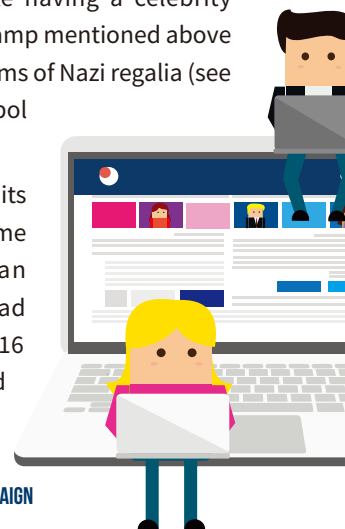
Image 9  
"Nazi Pepe" meme  
Source: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/pepe-the-frog-hate-symbol-adl-1.3782035>


Finally comes the category that is even more bizarre. As mentioned before, discussion regarding Trump in pro-Trump communities on Reddit and 4chan gradually evolved into a make-believe scenario where Trump supporters began to revere him as "God Emperor Trump" (see image 8). These people probably do not actually believe Trump is either a deity or royalty, but the name does point to a desire to elevate Trump into a larger-than-life icon. At this point, Trump is no longer simply a politician to them. This might not seem to fit into the traditional image of a meme, but as stated in the beginning of this case study, memes are gradually starting to leave the standard format of texts on images. "God Emperor Trump" is an idea that is repeated, copied and interpreted by a mass of people for the purpose of personal enjoyment; it is, by definition, still a meme.

Also in this category is the political appropriation of the cartoon character Pepe the Frog by the pro-Trump camp. The character was created by artist Matt Furie, who has gone on record to condemn the use of the character in racist and violent propaganda.<sup>xix</sup> The character had actually been featured in memes for some time before the Trump camp took it as an unofficial mascot in 2016. The logic, perhaps, is that

they hoped that taking already popular character to help disseminate their beliefs would make their target audience relate better to them; not unlike having a celebrity endorsement. Regardless, the unsavory elements in the Trump camp mentioned above quickly took hold of Pepe and started depicting him in various forms of Nazi regalia (see image 9) to an extent that the character was branded as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>xx</sup>

These efforts finally came to a peak in the campaign that its creators on Reddit and 4chan called the 'Great Meme War'; a name perhaps too extravagant to describe what amounts to an uncoordinated and decentralized effort to create and spread politically-oriented memes.<sup>xxi</sup> It was an effort all through the 2016 election to oversaturate the cyberspace with the content described above, ranging from posters featuring Trump slogans to hate

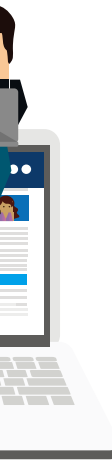




propaganda to images of Pepe the Frog in a variety of racist scenarios. The content was posted in a variety of platforms, not limited to Reddit and 4chan – not even limited to political discussions. Many online Trump supporters took part in circulating this content, mostly as a joke, but unknowingly being part of an unprecedented political machine.

## HOW MEME CULTURE HELPED POLITICIZE THE INTERNET

After discussing the goals of the Trump campaign, as well as the content that his supporters propagated on the Internet, we will now move on to explore how these two factors are linked. Before we begin, we need to understand his target audience. As stated above, many of the users on Reddit and 4chan are young people. Before 2016, this is not the demography that most people would associate with the Republican Party. However, also recall that one of the primary characteristics of this demographic is their desire for rebellion.



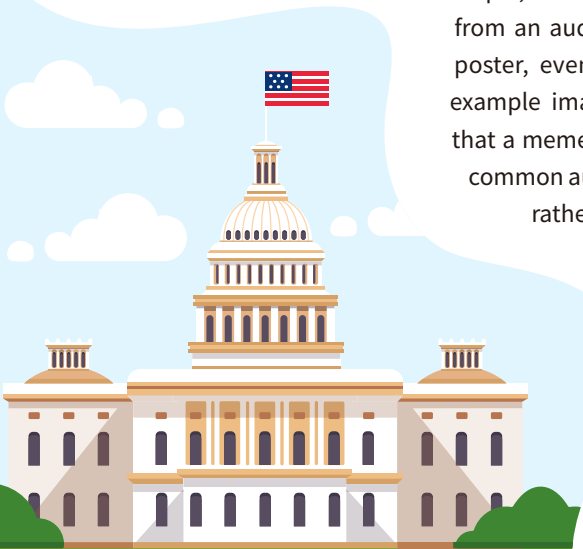
This demographic also explains the choice of communicating political beliefs through memes. The answer is more complex than simply, “young people like memes.” This group, above all, seeks community and validation. A meme is, in general, simply a joke that is perpetuated by a large number of people. It is not unreasonable to assume that one might derive a sense of belonging from creating or spreading a meme, or a sense of pride from 'getting the joke'. More evidence to this scenario: after Trump's victory, this same community began to refer to themselves as 'Kekistanis,' citizens of the imaginary 'Republic of Kekistan.'<sup>xxxii</sup> This is mostly satirical in nature, not much different from people identifying themselves as Beliebers or Directioners. Still, it is safe to assume that forging an imaginary nation-state with Trump as its leader must point towards an at least subconscious desire to congregate into a community.

The introduction of this case study put forth the argument that meme culture deeply affected the course of this particular election. Few political candidates in history come to mind that amassed the presence that Trump had in not only the Internet, but all forms of media. Trump is perhaps the first example of a political figure who has cultivated

a *bonafide* cult of personality on the Internet, elevating a larger-than-life figure beyond his own policies or competence. This is unprecedented – Hillary did not attain this level of online buzz, and neither did Obama or his opponents. They didn't become memes, or at least not to the level that Trump did. Whether this presence was positive or negative – sincere or joking – was, in the end, irrelevant. Trump did win the presidency.

Even with those explanations, why did it have to be memes? Why not try to influence their thinking through more conventional means? The answer to this question has to do with the nature of meme culture as part of the Spectacle. In this day and age, memes have played a massive role in determining what is currently popular on the Internet. There are entire social media accounts and webpages dedicated to collecting and sharing memes. The large variety in meme formats allow memes to be used to communicate virtually any sort of message and elicit any sort of emotional response. Most of all, the nature of meme culture allows content to be spread in a large radius, easily and organically.

Propaganda, for the most part, is overtly political and leaves little doubt in an audience's mind of its political nature. With a meme, however, most people only see a simple, innocent joke. A meme can elicit emotion from an audience just as well as any propaganda poster, even rage, fear or anger, as seen in the example images above. The key difference being that a meme is more palatable to be consumed by common audiences, being viewed as simply a joke rather than a political agenda. Disguised as a meme, political beliefs can be communicated widely without the negative connotations that come from spreading propaganda.



The same applies when politicians or companies share memes in order to seem relevant. Audiences mostly turn away from overly political or commercialized content. The key characteristic in the use of memes in Trump's campaign, however, is that for the most part this is not an active effort by the Trump campaign. The Trump campaign did not adopt Pepe as its official mascot, nor refer to Trump as God Emperor. Indeed, when one examines the memes in question, there is little to no correlation with Trump's campaign platform. In a practical sense, however, recall that these communities have based their identities out of a desire to rebel, offend and scandalize the masses. Donald Trump has rebelled, offended and scandalized people all over the world. It is this aspect that has drawn this community towards him, regardless of his policies or competence.

This is a very interesting example of the Spectacle in action. The people who consume these memes appear to have very little connection to Trump's campaign policies, or even to Trump as a person. Instead, the connection that they feel is to the mythologized image of Trump that has been created by meme culture; the God Emperor Trump, leader of Kekistan. The memes featuring Trump did not speak of his policies or objectives. The objective was simply to spread his name and face as often and as widely as possible. If these people ended up voting for Trump, they almost certainly did not vote for him because they agree with his platform; they voted for him because the memes told them that God Emperor Trump is better than Crooked Hillary. This has effectively turned the American democratic process into a game in which votes are determined simply because they want to see their candidate win, not because they believe the candidate is more competent.



## CONCLUSION

The 2016 Election was an upset in many ways. Few guessed that a candidate like Donald Trump would be able to win the presidency. Fewer still guessed that he would do so with the aid of a cartoon frog. Did memes win the election? Difficult to say, seeing as how there is not yet a method to properly quantify the psychological effect of memes. But there is no question that memes affected the mood of the election. What should be an exercise of democracy became a farce where political agendas are determined by hostility and making fun of the opposition. Using the spectacle theory brought by Guy Debord, we can understand how visual portrayals of objects can determine how they are perceived. This leads us to argue that memes as propaganda machines can bring a big impact in online political discourse.

Memes are not something completely new in politics, this time they came with a twist. Despite the comedic intentions, memes regarding Donald Trump actually brought support for him. The memes portrayed him as someone who is needed by the country and who is able to work with the right side of the American political pond. Pepe the Frog and many others have 'participated' in the Great Meme War, and the war itself worked for Trump. It gained him more and more popularity, and it managed to override the controversy which went against him. It actually works – memes influence people, and they construct ideas of people towards objects highlighted within them, and with that they influence the politics of the world's nations.



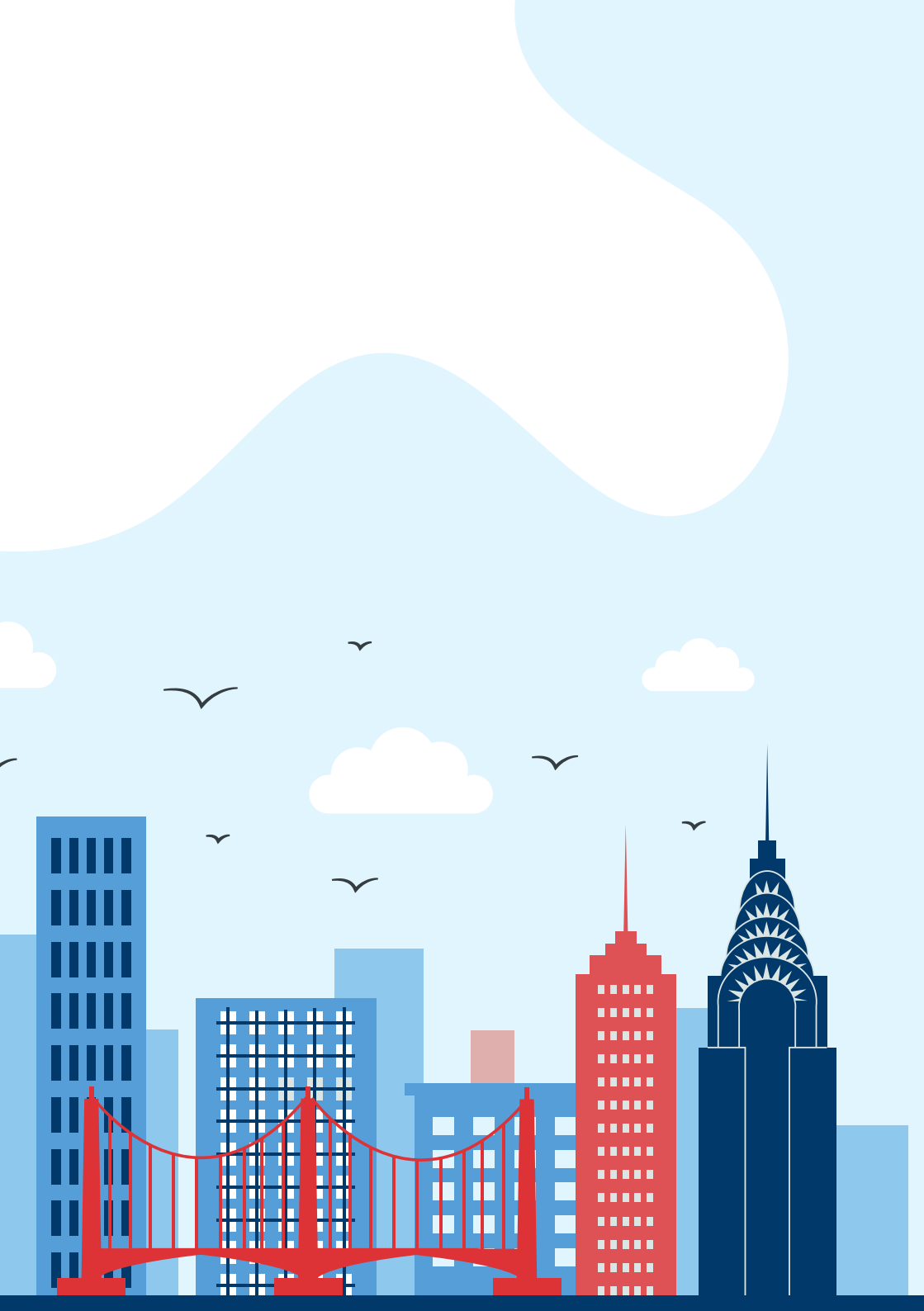


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