On Memes and Men: How Gendered Memes Influenced Trump's 2016 Election Legitimacy

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In November of 2016, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States of America, to the surprise of many political analysts, as the unique traits of the election had obscured their accurate predictions (Heiskanen, 2017, p. 5). More than before, the candidates' statements, promises, and individual characters were scrutinized (p. 1). All the while, individuals outside the US were uncharacteristically aware, informed, and involved in the proceedings through the internet (pp. 3-4). Yet, most impressively, the entirety of the electoral process was broadcast through a series of 'memes': humorous fragments of internet media, propagated in viral trends (Ross & Rivers, 2017, p. 2). Memes, considered "artifacts of participatory digital culture" (p. 1), facilitated the formation and expression of political opinions for those who created and shared them (p. 3). Consequently, memes partially shaped the elections' public discourse, leading many to question the extent to which memes influenced Trump's success.

Since the elections, various articles have addressed this notion, analyzing the themes and reach of election memes (Heiskanen, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Lincoln, 2019). However, far less research focused explicitly on memes containing gendered criticisms or support for Trump as a possible leader in the broader context of international relations (IR), despite gender being thematically poignant and polarizing (Lincoln, 2019). Considering the upcoming 2020 US elections, it is valuable to analyze Trump's success and individuals' capacity to influence elections, or any political events, through digital media with specific gendered content. As such, this paper will address the research question: To what extent did gendered representations of Trump in memes (de)legitimize his potential position as President during the 2016 US election?

Deriving from personal political participation, memes hold discursive power; they contribute to constructing political reality, which lends itself to constructivist analysis. Additionally, evaluating gendered accounts, feminist theory can explain how Trump was (dis)empowered as a masculine leader. This paper will argue that gendered memes delegitimized Trump by demasculinizing and feminizing him, spotlighting Trump as a non-threatening and submissive individual unsuited to head a global power according to the masculinist status quo of IR. However, more significantly, memes legitimized Trump by representing him as a hyper-masculine and degendered masculine leader, granting him authoritative power by aligning him with traditional gender values. Ultimately, legitimization was more influential as it prompted those agreeing with legitimizing memes to vote (Heiskanen, 2017, p. 3). All the while, those who did not vote likely did not see Trump as a threat to begin with, in part due to his delegitimizing social images.

Theoretical Framework: Constructivism, Feminism and Memes

To analyze the influence of memes on the US elections, a theoretical framework of constructivism and feminism will be used to showcase memes as dynamic artefacts of individual participation in politics. Constructivism is a critical theory challenging the ontological assumption that concepts in IR are an unchanging given. Instead, constructivism proposes a transformationalist ontology, where the world is in a constant process of 'construction' (Locher & Prügl, 2001, p. 114). Through construction, concepts in politics are created, reinforced, and legitimized by the continuous interaction of conditions and ideas (p. 116; Fierke, 2007, p. 188). Beyond this foundation, understandings of constructivism vary, hence specific concepts must be defined. The social, according to Wendt (1992), is based on the process of mutual constitution through identities and language. Identities are intrinsically social definitions of

agents, constituted by concurrent societal structures (p. 398) and serve as the basis of interests and interactions (p. 406), which in turn create intersubjective meanings in language. Language socializes agents to have specific expectations about the behavior and values of other agents, and the contexts in which political interactions, such as legitimization, occur (p. 405). Legitimization is the discursive creation of a contextually positive political identity, leading to recognized action and established power in the hierarchies of IR (Ross & Rivers, 2017, p. 3; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Conversely, delegitimization leads to a negative image due to the "absence of a rhetorical alignment with the prevalent social values of the time" (p. 4). Agents participating in politics may prioritize legitimization strategies to maintain status or interactions with other agents who reinforce particular worldviews. This can be done by aligning rhetoric with traditions of regulation in a given system (p. 5) or by focusing on moral evaluation by communicating shared normative ideals (pp. 6-7).

These traditions and ideals of social reality, according to feminist theory, are based on gender: the systematic social construction of identities and expected behaviors according to conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Locher & Prügl, 2001, p. 115). The pervasive nature of the supposedly given divisions between masculinity and femininity influence the concepts through which IR is discussed and organized, making gender a tool for the mutual constitution and maintenance of global hierarchies (Carver, 2014, p. 115). Constructivism and feminism share ontological ground (Locher & Prügl, 2001, p. 112), agreeing that gender is socially constructed. However, constructivism lacks the means to explain why certain gendered constructs are more influential (p. 113). Feminism, contrarily, locates power in the formation of gendered identities that "distribute privilege to create patterns of subordination" (p. 117). Thus, gender has the power to (de)legitimize political actors who align themselves with dominant gendered traditions or ideals, specifically, relying on the dominance of masculine hierarchies of credibility in IR (Carver, 2014, p. 124). Masculinity is not the opposite of femininity, but a conceptual lens that works as degendered and gendered. Degendered masculinity represents the neutral human form, elevating and moralizing masculine traits as valuable for all individuals, which constitute IR's male-centric gaze (p. 123). Meanwhile, gendered masculinity overtly advocates its superiority, through the values of strength and rationality as opposed to depreciated feminine traits (p. 117). Consequently, "masculinity rules even when men do not", as masculine concepts have been incorporated into social life (p. 115).

The internet, a platform for far-reaching communication, contributes to the legitimization of identities by facilitating relations between agents (Wight, 2016, pp. 12-13). 'Memes' emerged from the internet as artefacts existing at the intersection of language, society, and digital technologies (Ross & Rivers, 2017, p.1). According to Dawkins (1976) memes have three key characteristics: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Necessarily, memes are faithful to their source despite reproduction, shared in 'viral' waves, and recognizable in different communities (Hamilton, 2016, p. 164). Despite being a relatively new phenomena, memes have already been used by various actors in IR "to represent themselves or others in particular ways, to foment support for campaigns, and to share information" (Hamilton, 2016, p.162). It is now unusual for political events to progress without the creation of some variety of internet meme (p. 168). Another crucial aspect of memes is their humorous quality. Memes repackage often serious topics into easily digestible jokes or satire, presenting a simplified version of reality. Making fun of something intrinsically links its delegitimization via humiliation and critical jabs, granting memes the power to influence identities (pp. 177, 189). Memes can comment on anything, also constituting sites of politico-cultural knowledge for those who normally do not participate in politics (p. 174).

In the context of Trump's success in the 2016 US elections, memes enabled individuals to take a stand on and react to the electoral developments in real time, providing a platform for "alternative parallel discourses to mainstream media viewpoints" (Heiskanen, 2017, p. 1). One key subject was the extent to which Trump aligned with masculinities. And, based on specific political representations, memes mobilized voters to take action (p. 1).

Delegitimization of Trump: Demasculinization and Feminization

When Trump announced his presidential candidacy, he immediately faced commentary deeming him an unviable character for politics, or to run one of the most powerful countries in the world (Fairchild, 2018). Online, memes facilitated such commentary, creating images of Trump that could bar him from the White House. For the analysis, several topical text-on-image memes have been selected to exemplify the arguments, based on their prevalence and

'confirmation' by the meme database knowyourmeme.com (Literally Media, 2016).

Trump's delegitimization was facilitated through memes imbued with themes of demasculinization and feminization, targeting Trump's incapacity and submissiveness respectively, which clash with traditional masculine values of IR. Demasculinizing memes served to present Trump as 'less of a man', displaying his absent physical and mental strength required of leaders (Carver, 2014, p. 119), while feminizing memes attributed feminine traits to Trump. Historically, masculinity evolved to include values of rationality and strength to frame men as protectors of society (p. 119). This conception corresponds with the prevailing realist view of IR, where states exist in anarchy, being forced into a self-help system with no mutual reliance, only domination to ensure security (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 54). The US manifested realist theory, maintaining high degrees of power while fighting for its self-interests. However, recently the US' role as a security providing hegemon started making it easy to be "ripped off" by its allies (Hooft, 2018, p. 36). In this crisis, the US called for a president that would restore its status and glory (p. 35). Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again', sought to address exactly that concern. However, as the campaign progressed, Trump's rhetoric appeared spontaneous, covering up policy details "with authoritarian posturing and bravado" (Heiskanen, 2017, p. 8). Further instances, such as Trump's "Bing Bong" speech, made during a keynote presentation mocking the process of lobbying, or his infamous use of "bigly" (Literally Media, 2016) brought on slews of memes targeting his incapacity.

First, a series of memes targeted Trump's physical strength by commenting on his supposedly small hands and genitals. As conceptions of masculinity are based on physical strength and superiority over the weak female body, strength overtly elevates masculinity over femininity (Carver, 2014, p. 123). Consequently, 'bodily' memes attacked the foundation of Trump's legitimacy not only as a leader, but as a man. The 'small hands' memes were based on a jab at Trump from 1988, calling him a "short-fingered vulgarian", which resurfaced in 2015 (Literally Media, 2016). The general commentary ridiculed Trump as being incapable to hold the world in his hands as the leader of the US, literally and metaphorically, because his hands were too small.

Political opponent Marco Rubio, jumped on the bandwagon, stating "You know what they say about guys with tiny hands … you can't trust them!" (Literally Media, 2016). This particular remark relates to secondary attacks on Trump's genital size, aiming to further humiliate him. Rubio's "can't trust them" addition, undermined the expectation for how the phrase would be continued. Usually, general body proportions are associated with genital size, Trump's small hands not boding well for his endowment. Men with small genitals generally need to 'overcompensate', finding other ways to manifest their potency of masculinity and overcome insecurities of insufficiency (Diamond, 2006, p. 1101). Consequently, Rubio's comment, equated political trust with the possession of large genitals, implying that Trump lacked both. Trump publicly and seriously expressed his irritation with the mocking remarks. However, this susceptibility to personal attacks only lead to Trump's insecurity and mental strength also being targeted through infantilizing memes. Trump was represented as a baby for his outbursts and childish language, as his statements frequently displayed both his lack of "basic knowledge about the world" and his unwillingness to learn about it (Heiskanen, 2017, p. 8).

It is intuitive that political participation requires political knowledge, while all Trump showed was disregard for policy processes and the complexity of IR. These deficiencies were attributed to his bratty nature and the fact that he was not grown up enough to be a rational adult. 'Baby Trump' memes were reinforced by Trump revealing that his career started off by receiving "a small loan of 1 million dollars" from his father (Literally Media, 2016). Consequently, the irony of Trump's dependence on others was pointed out and related to the idea that he could not truly fight for his own things, endangering the US' political interests as well.

Second, memes attributing feminine traits to Trump contributed to speculating that Trump would be weak and subordinate political actor. In the dominant hierarchies of masculinist IR, femininity is out of place and in perpetual submission to masculinities (Carver, 2014, p. 115). Throughout the election, one key concern was the rising tension with Russia. Continuing to lack transparency and with rumors of collusion, the US had to decide between favorable relations with Russia or a return to conditions similar to the Cold War (Masters, 2018). However, in regard to election memes it wasn't so much about state, but leader relations. In years prior to 2016 Putin acquired a meme cult following as a masculine icon (Rahman, 2018). During the elections, Putin maintained his 'manly' role, while Trump

was represented in memes as his wife or sexual conquest.

This was a ploy to showcase Trump's submissiveness and need to please Russia. Trump himself seemed to support this framing through his "strange fascination with strongman leaders" (Gijswijt, 2016, p. 21). The memes, thus, served to warn voters that Trump would allow America itself to be treated as 'the woman' in political relationships, being abused and overpowered. Although, these memes hyperbolize and jump to conclusions, they also reproduce the extensive prejudices that serve as foundations of structures in IR "putting into images what world politics have traditionally done in words" (Hamilton, 2016, p. 188). Delegitimizing memes gave Trump a non-threatening identity, convincing individuals that he was a joke and that there was no need to even vote against him.

Legitimization of Trump: Hyper-Masculinization and Degendered Masculinity

However, delegitimizing memes were faced by a countermovement of legitimization, which used the same reframed topics, now aligned with patriarchal and conservative values (Chappell, 2006, p. 493). Legitimizing memes represented Trump as hyper-masculine or entirely degendered: an ideal presidential candidate. Those creating legitimizing memes likely shared concerns of America becoming too docile of an international actor, in need of a strong leader (Hooft, 2018, p. 36). Whereas before Trump's 'Make America Great Again' slogan was ridiculed, for legitimizing meme creators it represented unified values (p. 36), amounting to 'Make America *Masculine* Again'. Hyper-masculine memes made clear that Trump would reel America through the existing relations of gender and female subordination: a feminine America, corrupted by international interdependence had become 'too nice' and needed to be disciplined by a man with the power to do so. Trump was represented as formidable, referencing powerful men in pop culture, such as Duke Nukem: a video game character, willing to use relentless violence to save his home.

This was in stark contrast to Trump's main opponent, Hillary Clinton. As the first woman nominated for the U.S. presidency, her capabilities were constantly questioned and undermined (Heiskanen, 2017, p. 13). Broadly, Clinton did not align with people's values, never gaining legitimacy in the eyes of her own supporters (p. 14), while existing gendered relations reaffirmed that an incapable *man* in office was better than *any* woman (Carver, 2014, p. 120). Although Trump also experienced polarizing moments, his support base of mostly white males did not falter (Pew Research Center, 2018). For example, the locker-room talk of the 'Trump Tapes', which captured Trump bragging in vulgar terms about kissing, groping and trying to have sex with attractive women by grabbing them "by the pussy" (Literally Media, 2016), did not offend, but rather galvanized his supporters (Heiskanen, 2017, p. 15). They agreed that controlling females was necessary, (Fairchild, 2018) especially by seizing their reproductive organs, feeding into the conservative conception that childbirth was women's fundamental purpose (Chappell, 2006, p. 513). Consequently, Trump was empowered to also 'grab America by the pussy' by becoming president and controlling the state.

Meanwhile, Trump's degendered representations empowered him as America's protector and savior. Trump's populist rhetoric, which demonized immigrants as criminals, rapists, and free riders, related to his desire to prevent the country's invasion (Gijswijt, 2016, p. 21). With this he primarily used the logic of protecting 'women and children', from the threat of foreign men, despite the fact that his own expressions were also threatening women at home (Pain, 2014, p. 532). However, he also relied on two polarizing views of degendered masculinity; an American caretaker, inherently morally good versus a threatening immigrant, morally perverse (Carver, 2014, p. 120), a view reinforced by Trump's legitimizing memes, where even his wall was iconized and validated. In turn, Trump's self-image as the ultimate dealmaker was fueled, excusing his racism and bigotry, as his actions were presented as simply doing what *anyone* would do to protect his country (Gijswijt, 2016, p.21). Once again, Trump's main supporters agreed with these statements, seeing immigrants as threats to their economic and social well-being, taking jobs and culture away.

Hyper-masculine and degendered memes contributed to normalizing right-wing conservative ideas in election discourse, as the more frequently outrageous politics were expressed, the more impact they had on shifting what is considered status quo (Robertson, 2018). As such, everything between what was 'acceptable' and the new 'extreme' was seen as plausible. This aligns with Wendt's (1992) argument that if 1) there is dissatisfaction with the dominant

identity and, 2) the frequency of alternative interactions is high enough, identities can be changed (p. 419). As sufficient memes depicting Trump's legitimacy were created and shared, Trump was voted for by a unified group, endorsing his candidacy.

Realist Counter: State Power

A realist, however, would argue that Trump's success cannot be attributed to memes, as it takes away from the bigger picture. Instead his election is the result of relations between great powers being played out through new means of domination. Namely, Russian involvement through the internet constituted 'information warfare' through cyber power to skew election results and create a more favorable balance of power (Masters, 2018). Such a claim aligns with the view that the internet has become progressively more important for politics, yet, it should not be seen as a tool for individuals but rather interstate influence (Gunitsky, 2015, p. 45). This proves that states are not outdated actors in IR as state approved and organized attacks actually have more power to "shape the public consciousness via disinformation" (p. 45). Russian 'trolls' formed a new kind of army, trained in tactics of (de)legitimization through hacking and manipulation. Their target was Clinton, whose failure in the public eye allowed Trump to gain power, favored by Russia as he was more open to cooperate with them towards contributing to a bipolar distribution of power (Masters, 2018). Ultimately, Trump wouldn't have been successful if not for the backing of a great power. However, what this account neglects is that the influence of states does not preclude the potential impact of memes. The constructivist-feminist account is simply at a lower level of analysis, allowing for individual involvement in politics. Yet it has space to acknowledge that an interplay of different actors, all using the internet as a new tool, is what is changing the proceeding of politics.

Conclusion

Undeniably, there is some importance to looking into memes as shifting whose voices are heard in IR by challenging conventional sources of political power through humour and individual involvement (Hamilton, 2016, p. 192). As evidenced by the Trump elections, memes taking advantage of certain values have the power to (de)legitimize actors, influencing the outcome of political events. Furthermore, despite conflicting ideas, the rhetoric of all election memes reinforced political gendered divisions. Although the prior discussion lacked space to extensively address the gendered divide between Trump and Clinton, the influence of non-satirical criticisms, and the impact of non-gendered memes, it forms the foundation for further analysis into the changing dynamics of IR. As such, although Trump was demasculinized and feminized, legitimizing hyper-masculine and degendered memes ultimately proved to have more influence, by reinforcing Trump's positive political identity, and encouraging his voter base to take part in politics. Retrospectively, one sees that if political analysts had paid closer attention to memes throughout the election, they may have been less shocked by its results.

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