

Political memes: A dominant Communication culture amongst millennials in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

It comes as no surprise to today's generation that memes play an extremely important part in everyday life. Ranging from mere entertainment purposes in the form of funny images with relating text, to serious forms of message conveyance, these phenomena are something extraordinary. Humor has been used as a tool in politics since ages. With the advent of digital technology, internet memes have gained prominence. Memes are mediums that communicate information through humor and satire. Today, internet memes have become a part of the political campaigning. Parameters like political engagement, influence on political views and voting behavior are used to analyse the impact of political memes. They can also be described as humorous contents that are created and shared via Internet. They can be regarded as one of the ways of commenting on political reality, available to ordinary people. Using content analysis as a tool for data collection from a some of the most popular political memes, the findings of the study identifies several ways of how political memes communicate to millennials: social connection and entertainment, source of information and news, freedom of expression, campaigning tool. Using the elaboration of likelihood model of management, the study explores the reasons why memes are a dominant communication culture among millennials. They perceive memes as a convenient platform to interact freely as well as a platform that enables them to participate in the politics of the country, as well as providing them with entertainment. The study concludes that political memes are used as a tool for political communication and has a major impact on the audience. It also improves political engagement of the millennials of today. In the article the researcher analyses political memes as one of the dominant communication medium amongst millennials in Uganda.

Key words: *internet, political memes, elaboration of likelihood model, communication culture, millennials, humor*

Introduction

There are a number of types of political communication on the Internet. Ugandan politicians willingly use tools such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and the likes in order to be in touch with their electorates because it is a convenient and effective tool for them. The most characteristic publications are even reported by traditional media, such as television and newspapers, and the most popular Ugandan politicians' profiles have up to tens of thousands of followers. The Internet is, however a specific phenomenon and gives opportunity to express one's views publicly not only to well-known people, but also to ordinary ones (Shifman et al., 2014). Naturally people have little likelihood of creating very popular profiles and as a result have the possibility of reaching great amounts of Internet users with their opinions and views (Shifman 2014). However, there are other means available for them. Commenting on political news by creating or sharing Internet political memes is among the most popular of them.

The Internet meme is the main aspect of analysis in this article. An attempt to define and classify it and also observe its place and significance in political communication on the Internet will be undertaken. There are three issues to discuss in this article. First, theoretical analysis of Internet memes will be conducted. Second, Internet memes concerning politics in Uganda will be assessed. This part will propose some types of memes in Ugandan politics, as well as some of the most significant examples of the memes themselves. The third and last issue concerns considerations on the role and significance of Internet memes in Ugandan political atmosphere and in political communication in general.

A semiotic approach will be used in order to investigate internet memes and their role in the Ugandan political environment. This method focuses on signs and texts and enables analysis on how the relations between images, texts and meanings connect with each other to form for example social and political messages to the public.

According to Magdalena Kamińska (2016), an Internet meme is a colloquial symbol of popular and semiotic complex transmitted via Internet, with commonly characteristics of an Internet joke. It can be considered as a metaphor of a hypothetic cultural transfer or as a visualized meme itself.

The advancement of digital technology and social media evidently drove the birth and development of memes in the digital era. The Internet meme is a term commonly applied to the propagation or spread of digital and online contents such as jokes, images, rumors, videos, or

websites from person to others via the Internet (Shifman, 2013). The phenomenon is also helped by the user-generated websites and social media.

When political memes travel from person to person, they exert influence over what we believe, want, and do politically. They also undergo a processes of variation and competition among themselves for the attention of hosts, consumers or people which leads to retention and further sharing.

Background of the study

The history of Internet memes started at the beginning of 1980s when emoticons became popular. After some time, they became increasingly complicated. In the late 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Internet memes began to be created on the basis of digital photographs or pictures manipulated in computer programs, such as Photoshop (Buchel, 2012). Currently this exact form of Internet meme seems to be the most popular as a digitally manipulated picture or photography, most frequently with a humorous phrase added on the top or bottom of it, or both.

Coined by Richard Dawkins, a pioneer in the study of memetics, he introduced the concept of ‘memes’ in his book ‘The Selfish Gene (1976)’. The term meme comes from the Greek word ‘mimeme which means ‘to imitate’ (Dawkins, 1989). Since then, this concept has become a part of the popular communication culture in the world. With the advent of internet and digital technologies, the term ‘Internet Meme’ has gained popularity.

Dawkins (1976) goes ahead to define memes as the viral spread of ideas, they are defined as the analogous concept to the biological “gene”; they are self-replicating and they present the knowledge, views, perceptions, and beliefs, which are communicated from person to person (Shifman, 2013). Memes are units of information, ideas or mental representations, cultural instructions that are not only self-replicating but also contagious. The word “meme” is a contagious or viral process where memetic ideas move via texts, objects, images, sound, or behaviors. Memes are viewed figuratively as organic objects because they are selfishly driven to survive by replicating, circulating, and evolving in order to capture public attention (Sci & Dare, 2014).

Memes are considered as a medium of promotion which can reach wider audiences in a short period of time. Its history goes back to the time where emoticons were developed. The smiley face

which was created using punctuation marks by Scott E. Fahlman in 1982 was the first emoticon that was used in online communication. Fahlman mentioned that emoticons were required in online mode of communication because they help in understanding humor or sarcasm used in the language.

Memes have played a very important role in political awareness. One of the recent most prominent meme was the *#ZodiacTed* that became viral during the 2016 elections in USA. These memes portrayed Ted Cruz as a zodiac killer. A research survey by *'Public Policy Polling'* concluded that due to these memes, about 40% of the voters in Florida thought that he was actually a zodiac killer and their voting decisions were influenced by that particular meme. Memes have been used as a medium to communicate views about political issues, people and political parties. They are also used widely by the opposition parties to comment on decisions of the ruling government. (Buchel, 2012).

Today, internet memes have become a part of the political campaigning. This paper thus analyses how internet memes have been used as a medium to communicate political messages amongst millennials in Uganda. Parameters like political engagement, influence on political views and voting behavior are used to analyze the different political memes trending on social media platforms in Uganda.

Statement of the problem

Political memes phenomenon is not a new idea on the web and political platforms, but has vividly been of interest to researchers in the past few years. Political memes are mostly used during elections when political parties and personnel are competing for votes and use them to display their manifestos as well as rebuke their opponents. Given the current political dynamics in Uganda, there appears little research done linking political memes to millennials especially on how they perceive and use them for communication purposes.

In this day and age, it's nearly impossible to scroll through your social media feed and not see a political message. It's not just reports and commentary from the known media companies whether it's a comic response to a politician's tweet, comment or a post calling for awareness on an issue, political statements have increasingly been reaching people in an unlikely form of memes. Unfortunately, very few understand the power of memes. Their virality and humor is what drives

them. It sometimes seems hard to believe that social media sites like Facebook and WhatsApp which were originally designed for keeping up with friends could really influence our political views. While political memes have been around for quite some time, they became far more dominant with the 2016 presidential election in Uganda, but still the voters didn't quite understand their relevance as they were facing a new medium of communication.

If memes help politics reach young adults who weren't previously interested and get them engaged, the political climate in Uganda could shift drastically in favor of the young generation. Millennials care more about economic opportunity, climate change, food and water security, lack of political freedom, lack of education, and security," says Terri Towner, an associate professor of political science at Oakland University. So if you see millennials getting more involved in politics, even beyond the ballot box, we see some very different issues that would come to the top of the list.

So the main aim of this study is to highlight the importance of political memes and how they effectively deliver political messages to the public. This is so because there has been little research linking political memes to millennials in Uganda especially now that due to the advent of technology, information flow has taken a different level where every owner of a communication gadget can disseminate information to different platforms wherever they are.

Research questions

The study deals with the following questions;

1. How effective do political memes communicate to millennials in Uganda?
2. Does humour and virality play any role in communicating political messages amongst millennials in Uganda?
3. Do political memes help form political decisions among citizens in Uganda?
4. Can political memes act as a medium for political communication?
5. How far do memes go in influencing citizens to support or oppose a political party?

Significance of the study

This study contributes to a wide existing body of knowledge on political memes and internet memes at large through the underlying framework of elaboration of likelihood model of persuasion. As it will be highlighted in the literature review, a number of studies on internet memes focus on the meme's culture rather than their effectiveness with the messages they carry along with them. Additionally, all the studies are generally carried out in Europe and America. There is minimal research carried out on this subject of political memes in Africa and specifically Uganda and yet politics in Africa is also turning to internet for mass awareness of the different political issues. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill the gaps in research on political memes and how they effectively communicate to millennials in the Ugandan context.

It is also important to note, that people are now turning to internet for political activities and they regard it as a source of information on their part especially during times of looking for political news due to its popularity in reaching out to masses in a very fast manner and on a viral basis.

In terms of practical implications, this study hopes to guide the government and the Communication industry in Uganda in formulating future policies regarding online journalism, with a view of improving their services and in line with audience expectations. It will greatly enhance the formation of new guidelines, and recommendations for online media.

The findings from this research will add significantly to the bulk of existing scholarly knowledge in this domain and will be eminent in Uganda where little has been studied about political memes.

Memes are now the new preferred medium for political communication especially among the young people worldwide since they are the ones involved in politics on a higher level and are very familiar with technology. The study will also help the media in the country to wake up to the new developing communication medium that delivers important messages quickly and to a wider audience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As politics move to the Internet where more and more voters get their news and information, it is important to understand how users process and play with political messages. Today, the Internet has brought politics to a new level whereby political statements from different political institutions are designed to create a complex environment where new and old media triangulate. This allows citizens to have a direct, more active and significant rapport to traditional agents (Boulianne, 2009; Rueda Ortiz, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). Politics, a name derived from Web implies a way of understanding the relationships between government and the governed (Kruikemeier, 2014; Matud-Juristo, 2009) in platforms that are an extension of the public sphere (Westling, 2007). The internet has a large democratic potential due to its low cost as a communication tool, and the interactivity of digital media, which increases its engagement capacity. (Yoo & Gilde Zúñiga, 2014).

Knobel (2006) adds, that the study of political memes allows researchers to understand behaviors and actions, both in terms of the political parties that create them and the citizens who attach value to them upon consumption.

The web has become a remarkable environment for creating public opinion in the digital space as they channel personal positions and help listen to other people's ideas, which in turn generate influence through infectious processes (González-Bailón et al., 2014). Through the web, the concept of digital literacy is enlarged to include an assessment, modification and reconstruction of diverse texts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

The transition of traditional politics to social media has given rise to new spaces, forms and languages for political communication. Visual aspects have been important in this process and political parties and personnel have tried to integrate them into their web presence. The images and videos are carefully selected in order to have an impact and foster engagement on the intended audience.

The culture of memes.

The concept of memes was invented by Richard Dawkins who, in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), uses “meme” to refer to minimum cultural information units that move between individuals and generations, through the process of replication or transmission (Dawkins, 2006). According to this definition, memes can be songs, videos, catchphrases or images.

Rushkoff (2010) also adopts the analogy “meme-gene” introducing the variable of usefulness to explain the process of cultural selection. “Memes replicated if they were useful and powerful or died out if they were not. Just as a species can get stronger through natural selection of genes, a society gets stronger through the natural selection of memes” (pp. 100-101).

With the rise of the first viral content that managed to get wide dissemination on the Internet, the term “meme” was again retrieved to define any fragment of popular culture originating on the web (Stryker, 2011).

In particular, Coleman defined online memes as “viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a tendency to spread as fast as they can be moved by the internet” (2012: 109). Such content became a form of expression and participation of online communities (Vickery, 2014; Davison, 2012), through platforms of great connectivity and shareability that facilitate rapid consumption and propagation (García Huerta, 2014; Hernanz & Hernanz, 2012; Knobel & Lanshear, 2007).

Therefore, apart from the idea conveyed, the expression of the meme needs to be infectious, humorous or universal (Huntington, 2013; Chen, 2012; Hansen et al. 2011).

Spreadability of Memes

“why do memes spread?” A number of scholars have tried to find the answer to the question, and from the principles of selfishness, repetition, and circulation, Sci & Dare (2014) concluded that the evolution of memes is difficult to trace. Heylighen (1995) explained, that successful memes are those that have high level of “meme’s fitness”; meme’s fitness depends on two criteria;

(1) Learnability: how easy are they to learn? (Heylighen, 1995; Pech, 2003b; Williams, 2000).

(2) Infectiousness: how effective it is for the receiver to be able to pass it to another person or group (Heylighen, 1995; Pech, 2003b, Williams, 2000).

The critical role of the Internet cannot be neglected and it undoubtedly possesses the features that are more suitable for large-scale meme distribution compared to mediums of the past (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009). Shifman & Thelwall (2009) demonstrated three properties of the Internet that vividly drove the birth and development of memes.

(1) Accuracy: the digitalization of the meme allows the transfer of the content to be whole without any loss. At the same time, it enables consumers to edit and reproduce new versions of the memes with ease via digital technology such as Photoshop.

(2) Fruitfulness: Memes can be made by computers and the Internet especially via social media where they can be reproduced instantly to a number of people in the networks.

(3) Longevity: digital memes can be stored and archived in a wide range of personal computers and servers where they can be retrieved at any time.

According to Shifman & Thelwall (2009), a commonly transmitted Internet meme is a joke or a humorous content. The Internet allows humorous memes to reach the global audiences. In social media, a type of humorous meme that is prevalent is the “Photoshop meme”, which is considered “a pleasurable form of postmodern play, or the meme produced by “photoshopping images to humorously represent mimetic ideas” (Sci & Dare, 2014). Another type of notable memes on the social media is “image macros” referring to the use of superimposed conversational text on a specific image to create a joke (Sci & Dare, 2014).

Virality of memes

Virality is a term that began in 1996 with the free email provider Hotmail when it attached a promotional message to every email sent (Schulze, Schöler, & Skiera, 2013). It is a marketing approach that seeks to create viral dynamics of the process of receiving and forwarding messages from one person to another in their networks (Camarero & San José, 2014). The definition is closely related to word-of-mouth (WOM); it refers to “communication process in which the receiver in turn becomes a broadcaster, ensuring that the message continues to circulate” (Camarero & San José, 2014). Word of mouth is one of the most effective tools in communication.

“Going viral” usually implies the spread of an object, a video or an image, rather than just spreading information. Mills (2012) differentiated between virality and WOM stating that “‘viral’ means infection: rapid spreading across individuals and communities, growing exponentially with each cycle” (Mills, 2012). However, Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) defines virality as electronic word-of-mouth. The authors wrote that electronic WOM has advantages over traditional WOM in that it has a significantly higher diffusion speed and it is substantially easier to monitor and track (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011).

Researchers have tried finding out what causes the virality of content. A famous research by Berger & Milkman (2012) studies how emotion shapes social transmission or the viral dynamics. The findings from the research show, that the role of emotion is more complex than valence, whether the emotion is positive or negative alone. Although positive content is more viral than the negative ones, some contents with strong negative valence such as anxiety and anger-inducing could be highly viral as well. The authors concluded that the content that “evokes high-arousal emotions (i.e., awe, anger, and anxiety), regardless of their valence, is more viral” (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Furthermore, the study by Heath, Bell, & Sternberg (2001) found that people were more likely to pass along contents that produce high level of “disgust”. The role of “surprise” is also documented and the messages that contain elements of surprise with either positive or negative emotions have higher probability to be viral (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & van Wilk, 2007). Moreover, in viral messages, surprise often comes with other types of emotion, joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust, because surprise alone cannot guarantee success (Dobele et al, 2007).

In the same manner, Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Newstead (2013) studied the commercials and found that videos, where high arousal emotions are the primary driver, are shared about twice as much as those with low arousal emotions. The authors also found that people generally share more positive videos than negative. The results of the research are very similar to Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie (2013). They found that the “strong positive emotion to a video led to greater intent to pass on the video because we want other people in the network to experience the same pleasure that we did. The research also found that the videos that evoke “diffuse arousal” are likely to be more viral (Guadagno et al, 2013). However, some high-arousal videos were not shared because there are several other keys to the virality puzzle (Nelson-Field et al, 2013).

The different generations of the users could have an effect on content sharing and the digital natives, youths are found to be more likely to share contents on Facebook than the older generation (Strutton, Taylor, & Thompson, 2011). It is possible that younger generations of users tend to pass on the messages on social media because they more often receive those viral messages. The research found that those who receive more tend to send out more (Camarero & San José, 2014).

The process of viral dynamics includes the receiving and forwarding of the message and this two-step process is conceptualized by Mills (2012) as the “likeability” and “sharability” of the content. “Likeability refers to the degree to which the message is stimulating or engaging in some emotional or intellectual way” (Mills, 2012) and it signifies the willingness of the recipient to consume the content. Sharability refers to the degree to which the recipients or the consumers of the content feel that content can have a similar effect to others. Hence, the contagious message, or the message with a high level of “spreadability” is the sum of likeability (the perspective of the recipient) and sharability (the perspective of the sender) of the message (Mills, 2012).

Humor in politics

Political humor has been an important aspect of political awareness in our societies. It attracts not only the people who are active in politics but also helps in forming opinions for people who are not active participants in political issues and discussions. Various researchers’ mention that exposure to political humor increases political attention and helps in learning about political issues especially in the digital natives. This also leads to an increase in the feeling of political interest.

In addition, political humor is a mix of humor and user generated content. It includes the opinion of the masses and hence has a deeper impact on the audience. (Hajizada, 2010) The concept of political memes has become popular these days. There have been many websites like knowyourmeme.com, memedump.com, or memebase.com who act as an archival for the memes. Many professions like public relations and advertising professionals have started using memes creatively to communicate their message and attract audiences. The information that is passed through these memes is for creating a bell for publicity purposes rather than just giving information. Memes that are used in political campaigning are used for creating public opinion and as a tool for propaganda. (Bauckhage, s2011).

Memes as used in politics

In Politics, campaigners use memes as a medium for communicating with citizens. Bloggers and commenters are usually hired to generate the content. They thus create images and opinions in people's minds. A recent report mentions that in Azerbaijan, the production and circulation of internet memes were included as a part of their social media strategy. Memes are used for propaganda to reinforce ideas, identities and stereotypes. Even during the World War One, these memes were used in the form of satirical texts, images and artistic expressions. Poets and artists were hired even during those days to create cartoons and messages which could be publicized through posters and newspapers. (Leong, 2015)

Additionally, Memes are used as a medium for persuading citizens to vote for a particular politician and or political party. Shiftman in his book- 'Memes in Digital Culture', explains how this medium was efficiently used during the 2008 US elections. His research mentions that these memes are more of user generated content than information generated by political elites. Even though they are user generated, they look professional. They include videos and photos produced by professional artists. A lot of research goes into making of the memes content as part of political campaigning. Shiftman mentions that these memes are a mode through which civic participation is encouraged as the citizens can express their political opinions and be a part of debates and discussions which cannot be done through traditional mediums (Shiftman, 2013).

Furthermore, Political memes are eventually used to critique and comment on social and political issues in a given society for example, elections, food scarcity, police violence and brutality, and issues of equality (Huntington, 2015). Luqiu (2018) concluded that, the Internet enabled citizens to participate in the manufacturing of online counter-hegemony discourse. The process of participation provides grassroots bargaining power against the dominant discourse.

Memes as a citizen's reaction to politics in Uganda

According to the theoretical considerations presented above, Internet memes can be described as simple forms of entertainment available to a wide audience that can be created by ordinary people. No wonder they are sometimes classified as "*junk humor*", an expression that highlights its simplicity and lack of complexity. As has already been mentioned, memes can concern plenty of

matters. In this article memes will be restricted to those concerning politics and specifically those Internet memes that are recognized as examples of political activity of Ugandan citizens on the Internet.

In the context of political environment, it appears that political memes are most of all, examples of criticism of the political reality. Internet memes, as has been mentioned, are basically jokes on the internet. Similarly, to other satiric forms, such as stand-up comedy, memes are aimed to satirize or mock the social or political reality of today. As a result, the creators of “political “memes usually refer to current public news and try to mock either the situation or the politician responsible for it.

Memes as Political Participation and Communication

Internet memes have quickly adapted to comment on a range of political issues in several countries, but there is still some debate about how they function as a form of political communication. Shifman (2014) argues that memes are used as a form of political participation, and that this participation can be broken into three categories: memes as persuasion, memes as grassroots action, and memes as models of expression.

Shifman (2014) uses the “Obama Girl” video, a video created by a young girl singing about her crush on candidate Barack Obama during the 2008 campaign, as an example of memes as political persuasion. She argues, that voters are more influenced by friends and peers than mass media campaigns (Shifman, 2014). Videos like the “Obama Girl” meme can use simple, cheap video editing and creation to send a persuasive message out to a large community. As Grabe and Bucy (2009) argue, visual candidate framing can be very important to a campaign, and the “Obama Girl” video is an example of users creating a meme as a way to participate and comment on the media framing of Barack Obama as a young, attractive, and hip candidate.

Additionally, Shifman (2014) also defined political memes as a form of expression or public discussion. She argues that memes can act as a form of protest, like the “Pepper Spray Cop” meme, or they could be a catalyst for political discussion (Shifman, 2014). The best example of a meme prompting political discussion is the 2013 “Big Yellow Duck of Tiananmen Square” meme.

On the anniversary of the Tiananmen protests, the Chinese government censored all online searches and photographs of the event, even going as far as removing the word “today” from search engines, but one enterprising individual edited out the tanks from the famous picture of a

man standing in front of the tanks as they entered Tiananmen Square, and replaced those with big13 yellow rubber ducks. Users could then search for rubber duck to get a glimpse at or post the famous photograph. An international debate about government media censorship was sparked by the meme, making it the vehicle for political messages. Memes can also represent a political idea or candidate, providing a new opportunity to frame a candidate or issue outside of traditional media.

Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) theory

As one of media effect theories, Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of management explains how persuasion is used as a tool to affect opinions. (Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, 1980) argues, that the theory measures people's willingness to engage in elaboration. This depends on their motivation and competence. In general, people are more motivated to elaborate when the message is important to them. The idea is that when a person is presented with information, they process it on a certain level of elaboration. There are two ways of persuasion. One that focuses on elaborating what is presented and the second, where an argument is formed to persuade a person and his/her opinion is manipulated. This is the peripheral route of persuasion. Memes are a tool of political participation that uses the cognitive and the peripheral route to communicate and influence public opinions. This tool of awareness uses humor and sarcasm as elements for persuasion. (McClure, 2016).

The primary intention of the theory is to provide a unifying framework that could explain how the classic inputs into persuasion like the source, message, recipient, context could have different impacts, depending on the particular route to persuasion. Thus, either the central route or the peripheral route can be evoked in various situations involving different message types, individual differences among receivers, and environmental (or situational) factors. Here, memes use humor and sarcasm as elements of persuasion to spread them to wider audiences.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and method

Studying memes is a new approach to Ugandan politics. While their presence in the 2016 US presidential campaign raised some interest on the matter, in the Ugandan context, such research is limited and closer to activism rather than political communication (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2014; or Rodríguez, 2013).

Qualitative content analysis allows an inductive approach by generating frames from selected codes and guidelines of the memes selected for the study. Qualitative content analysis identifies underlying themes in the materials examined and supports them with brief quotations from the comments and text analyzed, marking the inductive approach (Bryman, 2012). The study was an exploration of the elaboration and likelihood management theory and content analysis.

The inductive process of defining frames by identifying themes and codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) is possible for this study. There was need to perform an inductive and qualitative study due to the lack of predetermined frames in previous studies of similar nature. The lack of a structured process for identifying themes usually associated with the qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2012) led the study in adopting the coding and Thematizing technique for Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis here comprised of Thematizing, coding and the categorization of data into the different frames.

Researchers report using content analysis from this approach while analyzing manuscript types in a particular journal or specific content in textbooks or visual content. This type of analysis is an unobtrusive and a nonreactive way to study the subject of interest (Babbie, 1992). It can also provide basic insights into how words are actually used. However, findings from this approach may be limited by their distraction to the broader meanings in the data. 35 most dominant memes circulating in the country from January all the way up to July have been selected to be content analyzed. The criteria used in selecting the sample was virality, spreadability, sharability as well as the number of times it was liked while on the different platforms.

Data collection and analysis

The memes were digitally recorded and thematically analyzed in order to discover hidden meanings from them five selected most dominant and widely spread political memes around the country them. Selective analyses were carried out on several aspects of the memes relevant to the research objectives and questions. Valid analysis is hugely aided by data displays that are focused enough to permit viewing of a full data set in one location and are systematically arranged to answer the research questions at hand.” (Huberman and Miles, 1994, p. 432). Furthermore, Duranti (2006) explains, “A more valuable analysis is a more selective one, as irrelevant information makes the outcome difficult to read and might make the research purpose incomprehensible” (p. 304).

All approaches to qualitative content analysis require a similar analytical process of seven classic steps, including formulating the research questions to be answered, selecting the sample to be analyzed, defining the categories to be applied, outlining the coding process and the coder training, implementing the coding process, determining trustworthiness, and analyzing the results of the coding process (Kaid,1989).

Thematic analysis process in this study was employed from Braun and Clarke (2006) who described the phases of thematic analysis of transcripts as familiarizing yourself with your data, creating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing themes as well as defining and naming them.

Finally, to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research data, researchers are advised to undertake the audit-trail procedure (Carcary, 2009). The trail is carried out by way of providing the relevant documentation or transcripts to professional persons such as academicians, senior PhD students and others in the same category who are experienced in qualitative research studies to establish the trustworthiness of the findings from the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Anney, 2014).

For the present study, the mem pictures, videos, posts and their transcriptions were given to experts who specialize in the English language and qualitative studies, for purposes of them being

examined for accuracy by comparing and reviewing codes and themes to qualify the meanings of the data.

The images, videos, comments and tweets on those particular memes were registered on databases of the different platforms, also with other additional information such as sender profile, publication time (day/evening or night), number of retweets in case of twitter (times the user disseminated the publication in their community of followers) and number of likes for facebook and other sites (times the user marked the publication as content of interest) and also the number of shares a particular meme garnered in the selected period of time. This register of memes from the different social platforms helped us record first impressions on the contents of the sample, which is essential in establishing the different study categories.

During the second phase, analysis of the selected memes was performed. Here, we considered both the content itself, graphic representation, theme and approach as well as the formal elements in each meme type, integration of text, font and text colour, integration of elements identifying a specific party that the comment is likely to be affiliated to for easy relation.

As Davison (2012) says, all memes include three elements: manifestation (external phenomenon), behavior (manipulation method of the manifestation) and the ideal (conveyed concept). Our sample limited the manifestation (images) and the behavior of the meme, both in its creation (editing, designing and graphic labelling) as well as in its distribution (posting). While the formal aspects of the image contribute data relative to the behavior of the meme, this phase focused on the analysis of the ideal. In order to define the ideal of a meme, we labelled images according to their signification (image and text). When realizing a concept, theme and approach were considered the labels and other textual content integrated in the image to anchor its meaning.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the researcher decided to use open variables to determine the content of the publications and their theme framework. This procedure of analysis is in line with **Huntington (2013) discursive perspective** which helped in determining how concepts spread by memes are joined in a political speech.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to enable data processing and organization of memes according to their ideal, recoding of diverse items of the study was done. In this phase, several content variables were used, establishing common categories through an inductive process.

On realizing the time and dates on which the different memes were first posted, the researcher recorded the timing (time and date) in a single variable. This way, we managed to understand who the meme was targeting as its primary recipients. Apart from recoding variables, this phase focused on establishing the interaction rate of each of the analyzed memes. This helped to relate whether the content published in a particular meme achieved its primary goal through the number of retweets, likes and shares it has to determine the degree of the engagement of the public with the sender.

Coding and themes

There are five dominant themes that represent political memes and how they communicate political messages to millennials in Uganda. The themes are: social connection and entertainment, source of information and news, freedom of expression, campaigning tool. The themes are explained by codes more in details. The four themes drawn from the data and analyzed below explain all the research questions in terms of how political memes communicate to millennials in Uganda. Each theme is discussed along with the several codes that underline them to make sense out of the data that was extracted from the memes that were chosen as the samples of the study.

Table 1: Forming political decisions among citizens.

Research question	Codes	Themes
Do political memes help form political decisions among citizens in Uganda?	Used as campaigning tool, forming political choices	Campaigning tool

Do internet memes influence
citizens to support or oppose a
political party?

Campaigning tool

Campaigning tool is one of the themes generated from the data collected from the memes, and is among the most prominent ones as observed from the samples in the study. The codes under this theme are: Used as campaigning tool, forming political choices.

The first code conveys, that political memes are used as a campaigning tool amongst millennials in Uganda. According to the number of memes reviewed, it is clear that political memes are favored as a campaigning tool to deliver political messages to the young generation since they can easily be disseminated in the shortest period of time but to a larger audience with an aim of resending them until they become viral. This finding is supported by previous literature, that political memes are a marketing tool that seeks to create viral dynamics of the process of sending and receiving of political messages from one person to another in their networks (Camarero & San José, 2014). Additionally, politicians use memes as a medium for communicating with citizens.

Informant A (personal communication through an Instagram post 31/01/2019) reveals, that however much the incumbent has the power to be reelected, this is the time the younger generation to take their share. It is an Instagram post by a popular cartoonist that went viral to the extent of receiving more than one hundred thousand shares and about two million likes from the time it was posted in January. Informant B (personal communication from a politician) in a post seen on his Facebook account, he rallies upon his supporters to come rally with him while hearing his political case at the High court in Uganda, and there after addresses them on a rally that he had organized. This post was virally shared by more than five thousand people in four hours since he posted it the morning of his case trial at court. All these posts are very clear and directly sending messages to the respective supporters of political entities to make sure that they persuade them to their side.

The second code is that political memes help in forming political choices among citizens. This code also falls under campaigning tool theme. A number of studies have found out that political

memes once they start circulating around people, people tend to get more attracted to the messages they propagate and hence some end up changing their positions on who to support depending on how they have perceived the message in the memes. Therefore, they end up creating images and opinions in people’s minds. Shifman in his book- ‘Memes in Digital Culture’, explains how this medium was efficiently used during the 2008 US elections. His research mentions that these memes are more of user generated content than information generated by political elites. These once they start propagating, they perform the role of convincing people with the agenda of changing their minds in order to lure them to their political sides.

Table 2: A medium for political communication

Research question	Codes	Themes
Do political memes act as a medium for political communication?	Persuasive tool, multiple political news and information sources, following politicians and political parties	Sources of news and political information

Sources of news and political information

Political memes as a source of news and political information amongst millennials is the second theme and it has three codes namely; Persuasive tool, multiple political news and information sources, following politicians and political parties. This these is supported by previous literature from a number of scholars. Heylighen (1995) explained, that successful memes are those that have high level of fitness depending on Learnability and Infectiousness or simply how effective they are for the receiver to be able to pass it to another person or group after having been affected by the news in the in them (Heylighen, 1995; Pech, 2003b, Williams, 2000). Shifman & Thelwall (2009) says, that political memes have features that are undoubtedly suitable for large scale information dissemination as compared to other mediums. Knobel (2006) adds, that the study of political memes allows researchers to understand behaviors and actions, both in terms of the political parties that create them and the citizens who attach value to them as sources of political news and information about their political desires and affiliations.

Mememes perform a significant role in the distribution of political news and information online (Mis, 2016). It is one of the most sought after sources of political news and information for millennials,

for they are always attached to their gadgets almost on twenty-four-hour basis. Additionally, it is also the millennial's key source of information even on other issues political or not political, so long as they promote their political interests and those of their political affiliations.

Political memes are referred to as persuasive tools of communication because they convince people through viral messages to change to where the message is directed to. They are also used as a medium for persuading citizens to vote for a particular politician and or political party. In addition, memes are used as propaganda to re enforce political ideas of politician and political parties. During World War One, memes were used as satirical texts, images and artistic expressions. Poets and artists were hired even during those days to create cartoons and messages which could be publicized through posters and newspapers in order to persuade voters to the different political interests at the time (Leong, 2015).

Another code under the theme 'sources of news and political information' is following political parties and their respective politicians. Shifman (2013) asserts, that even though they are user generated, they are often made and produced by professional artists. Additionally, they are used as a medium for persuading citizens to vote for a particular politician and or political party. These put in a lot of research and thinking in order to manufacture them with elements of political campaign in order to suite their desired audience. More so, Shifman puts it, that political memes are act as a vehicle through which civic participation of citizens is realized whereby they have the liberty to express their opinions and later become a part of the daily political debates through the different medium while exhibiting their political support to their preferred politicians and political parties (Shifman, 2013).

The amount of internet political memes and their diversity is wide. Both in Uganda and the world over are plenty of websites where they are published as well as shared. For example, websites like quickmeme.com, memebase.com, cheezburger.com, memecenter.com, memestache.com among other English-speaking ones, and local ones such as ethnographymatters.net, knowyourmeme.com, memesofuganda.com and several other local avenues like the cartoonists who on a daily basis draw editorial cartoons to describe and or inform the public about an ongoing hot topic in the country. These and many other factors contribute to information gathering as well as dissemination of political news through these platforms and many other criteria as well.

It is also important to note how memes communicate or inform the public about political messages or information through disseminating political memes. They all base their communication and political updates all the time on the latest news and information around the world, but particularly on Uganda. The framers and producers of the mems also target millennials because they know that information reaches them very fast through the different social media platforms that later turn the memes into viral components on the web. The different generations of the users could have an effect on content sharing and the digital natives, youths are found to be more likely to share contents on Facebook than the older generation (Strutton, Taylor, & Thompson, 2011).

Table 3: how memes communicate to millennials

Research question	Codes	Themes
How do political memes communicate to millennials in Uganda?	Platform for criticizing government, supporting government, free platform for expressing opinions, extending discussions on different platforms, expressing dissatisfaction with the government, sharing memes with large number of people	Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression

Another theme is about freedom of expression where we see citizens freely expressing their political affiliations and desires by producing, reproducing as well as creating the memes themselves. freedom of expression here is seen as the ability to openly display or communicate one’s ideas about the world and their political beliefs to other people. (Balkin, 2004). under the freedom of expression theme, codes such as Platform for criticizing government, supporting government, free platform for expressing opinions, extending discussions on different platforms, expressing dissatisfaction with the government, sharing memes with large number of people are formed.

The advent of social media platforms has changed the ways in which we express our beliefs and ideas. Especially with the technological advancements, people are able to express themselves freely whereby anyone can easily open an online account and start communicating with millions of people (Cerf, 2012). Memes have played a significant role in helping millennials who have got an

opportunity to express themselves through the dissemination of political memes on the different platforms on social media with an aim of sharing them with their friends, which in the long run serves as an open and free forum for speech (Jackson, 2014). Previous studies have shown that some people feel more comfortable in expressing their ideas online (Jarad, 2009; Najjar, 2010; Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Additionally, the Internet has brought politics to a new level whereby political statements from different political institutions are designed to create a complex environment where new and old media allows people to express themselves. This allows citizens to have a direct, more active and significant rapport to traditional agents (Boulianne, 2009; Rueda Ortiz, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). González-Bailón et al., (2014) reveal, that the internet has proved to be a remarkable environment where public opinion is generated with an aim of listening to each other's opinions which later exalt influence through infectious processes.

One of the codes generated from the data is, that political memes act as a platform for criticizing government. The emergence of social media platforms has vividly refashioned the ways in which we are able to express our ideas as human beings. However, with the technological evolution that allows free expression, anyone can easily set up an online platform and start communicating with over two billion people (Cerf, 2012). Memes play an important role in criticizing the government as well as checking on their credibility on the work that they do for the public. This is in line with Huntington (2015) who said, that Political memes are eventually used to critique and comment on social and political issues in a given society for example, elections, food scarcity, police violence and brutality, and issues of equality in a given country. This is the same thing that happens in Uganda. Additionally, Luqiu (2018) asserts, that political memes enable citizens participate in the production of online counter propaganda and speech. The process gives the public confidence in them while participating directly in national issues by airing their concerns through criticisms of government failures.

The same platform of memes used for criticizing the government, is the same used for supporting it as well as acting as a platform for free speech. People create and reproduce memes in support of their political beliefs as a way of highlighting the freedom of speech that they enjoy. Memes that circulate through social sites play a significant role in the lives of its users who have the opportunity to express their thoughts in politics with their friends, serving as an open and free

forum for speech (Jackson, 2014). Previous research has shown that some people feel more comfortable in expressing their ideas and thoughts through different means online (Jarad, 2009; Najjar, 2010; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Foreample, Jarad (2009) states that Facebook alone allows people to express themselves in a way that can be difficult when using other means of communication. This is one way of showing that people have the freedom of speech to do what they want to do without any hindrance.

The freedom of speech and participation is evident in this research study. the memes in study here affirm, that people who have access to internet are able to express themselves through creating and posting political memes through the different social network platforms without following any rules especially in the Ugandan context. The allowance of freedom of expression within certain parameters on social networks has allowed users to publish and post their topics of interest through the memes regarding the support or criticisms that they have on the government of Uganda.

From the discussions above, we deduce, that millennials use memes as a platform for expressing their opinions and extend discussions about their political affiliations with their friends. This discovery is consistent with studies by Quan-Haase and Young (2010), Younis and Mufle (2010) and Estrin (2015)

Table 4: The role of humor and virality in political communication.

Research question	Codes	Themes
Does humour and virality play any role in communicating political messages amongst millennials in Uganda?	Significant communication tool, making friends, virality, moves very fast, Humor, satire, mocking	Social Connection and entertainment

Social Connection and entertainment

Social connection is one of the theme that has been generated from the data and is one of the most agreed upon themes found in the study. the codes under here are: Significant communication tool, making friends, virality, moves very fast, Humor, satire, and mocking.

The first code conveys, that political memes are a significant communication tool. From the memes analyzed, they clearly indicate, that people use them as a communication tool for political

information with their friends in Uganda. This finding is supported by Camarero & San José (2014) who asserts, that memes are a marketing approach that seeks to create viral dynamics of the process of receiving and forwarding information from one person to another in their networks. This is closely related to the word of mouth that refers to memes as a communication tool that turns the receiver into the broadcaster while ensuring that the information continues to circulate (Camarero & San José, 2014). Additionally, memes are one of the effective communication tools that takes political messages to a viral level by spreading the images or videos and not just communication. This is also supported by Mills (2012) who puts virality as rapid spreading across individuals and communities. However, Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) adds, that virality can mean electronic word-of-mouth. The authors wrote, that electronic word of mouth has advantages over traditional word of mouth where it works at a significantly higher diffusion speed and it is substantially easier to monitor and track.

The other code is about making friends. Memes are also used as tools for socializing with friends and maintaining significant relationships and making new friendships through establishing online contacts in the virality context (Lewis & West, 2009). This finding clearly indicates, that political memes help millennials to make friends from different backgrounds of cultures and helps them keep in touch because they are overly spread on a viral basis and eventually manage to reach wider audiences.

As for entertainment, the memes analyzed reveal that they are also a source of entertainment because of the humor and satire in them. This is supported by Nam, (2014) who says, that Entertainment is an activity meant to give relaxation or Entertainment is an activity designed to give pleasure or relaxation to an audience. In general, people are motivated to use political memes as a source of entertainment because it provides some elements like humor and satire for entertainment (Valentine, 2011). Additionally, some studies explored the use of social networking sites for fulfilling the need for entertainment (Sheldon, 2008; Cronin, 2009; Jarad, 2009; Omekwu, Eke & Odoh, 2014) and this case through leveraging on the humor that always comes with the political memes and cartoons at the same time. This provides opportunity for users to better stay connected and satisfy their needs (Wysocki, 2012).

Political humor is a mix of humor and user generated content. It includes the opinion of the masses and hence has a deeper impact on the audience (Hajizada, 2010). This confirms the argument, that

millennials communicate with humor while circulating the political memes. These are always in form of cartoons, images and videos. As we discussed above, political memes may be described as simple forms of entertainment to wider audiences that can be created by ordinary people. This is why some times they are referred to as junk humor, a reference that shows meme's simplicity to communicate humorous political messages. This finding also highlights, that humor has been used in politics for many years and are recognized as examples of political activity Ugandan millennials engage in to exercise their freedom of expression by entertaining themselves with them.

Conclusion

The amalgamation of millennials in Uganda and how they communicate with political memes together with the elaboration of likelihood model of management makes an interesting study and recommendation to the government of Uganda to regulate how political memes communicate with millennials especially because of the emergency of fake news around the globe. Because memes use a lot of humor and satire to communicate, there is a likelihood that the information that circulates through them needs thorough screening because most of it is meant for entertainment and not necessarily for political capital.

The themes extracted from the data addresses the four research questions of the study. These include, campaigning tool, sources of news and political information, freedom of expression and Social Connection as well as entertainment purposes. The research questions pertaining to reasons whether political memes help form political decisions among citizens in Uganda and whether internet memes influence citizens to support or oppose a political party is answered by the theme of campaigning tool. The third research question regarding whether political memes are a medium for political communication is answered by the theme of Sources of news and political information regarding the Ugandan political environment. The other research question about how memes communicate to millennials is answered through the theme of freedom of expression on the side of the millennials and the citizens at large. Lastly, the issue of whether humour and virality play any role in communicating political messages amongst millennials is addressed by the theme of Social Connection and entertainment through humor and satirical memes.

The study provides recommendations to the government of Uganda on the perspective of political memes that circulate among millennials to enact policies that regulate the circulation of such digital material to avoid the emerging issues of fake news that have infiltrated our daily consumption of news.

In general, political memes can be a convenient and at the same time safe way of talking to young people about politics matters. It is one of the characteristic for memes that they appear and spread very quickly. This applies to memes concerning politics as well. In most of the situations when a politician embarrasses himself, Internet memes appear very soon. They are therefore an extremely quick tool of shaping opinions of ordinary people on politics in public. Additionally, in favorable circumstances memes can deliver more than entertainment contents. If the consumers have no interest in politics, they may go for the humor and satirical elements that are always exhibited in the memes. As a result, memes can be regarded as a tool of political communication aimed to discredit or support political opponents. It is very hard to assess their strength in political environments.

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