

**STEAMED HAMS AND BASHING TANS –
Analysing Irish political discourse through
Internet memes in a Simpsons Facebook group.**

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Abstract

Political participation has evolved dramatically in the last 20 years. New media technologies and online spaces have enabled people to participate in politics and express their opinions in ways that were not possible in the past. One of the ways users can express their political opinions is through user generated content known as internet memes. Memes are images, videos, or pieces of text that are often humorous and spread rapidly on the internet and have become a staple in online communication. They can be used to convey a wide range of ideas and influence social attitudes in contemporary society (Shifman, 2014). Previous studies on internet memes have looked at their role in political engagement and activism, as well as their influence on political campaigns such as the 2016 US Presidential Elections (Ross & Rivers, 2018) and Brexit (Kinane, 2021). However, majority of these studies have been conducted in the context of the US or the UK and there is little to no research on the use of memes in Ireland. The purpose of this research is to analyse Irish political discourse through internet memes. This study looks at interactions on Irish politics through memes created by members of the Ireland Simpsons Fans Facebook Group. The research indicates that these spaces have the potential to shape social and political attitude formation in the public sphere due to their accessibility and the level of camaraderie identified in the group dynamics.

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Introduction

In the last twenty years, political participation has undergone significant changes due to the emergence of new media technologies and online spaces. The internet has allowed individuals to express their political opinions in ways that were not previously possible, and user-generated content such as internet memes have become an increasingly popular means of political engagement. Memes are cultural artifacts that can be shared, remixed, and spread virally across the internet, often with humorous or satirical intentions. They typically consist of images or videos accompanied by text and are often used to comment on contemporary issues and events. Memes have become a significant tool for political activism and engagement, as they allow individuals to communicate their political beliefs in a visually compelling and easily shareable format (Milner, 2016). Previous research has demonstrated the influence of memes in political campaigns, such as the 2016 US Presidential Election (Ross & Rivers, 2017) and Brexit (Kinane, 2021). However, there has been little to no research on the use of memes in an Irish political context.

Research Question

This study aims to answer the following:

- **To what extent do internet memes contribute to Irish political discourse.**

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse discussions around Irish politics through internet memes, specifically focusing on memes within the Ireland Simpsons Fans (ISF) Facebook Group. By analysing Irish political discourse through ISF memes, this thesis aims to gain insight into the role and impact of memetic content in shaping public opinion and political engagement. It seeks to explore how memes within this specific online community reflect and influence discussions on Irish politics, examining the themes, messages, and sentiments conveyed through humorous visual content. The research will delve into the ways in which internet memes serve as a platform for political commentary and provide a unique lens into the dynamics of Irish political discourse in the digital era.

This study will use a combination of content analysis and thematic analysis to examine memes related to Irish politics that have been posted by members of the Ireland Simpsons Fans Facebook group. A content analysis will be used to examine the

characteristics of the memes, including their imagery, text, and style. Thematic analysis will be used to identify the recurring themes and topics that emerge from the memes. Through this analysis, the researcher aims to highlight the growing significance of internet memes as a tool of communication in political participation in Ireland. The first chapter of this thesis will provide a literature review, outlining important media theories around identity, political discourse, participatory culture, and the public sphere. This section will also provide background information on the political landscape of Ireland, as well as an in-depth history of internet memes, including their origins and evolution. Additionally, the history and cultural significance of the television series *The Simpsons* (1989) will be covered. A detailed explanation of content and thematic analysis is provided in the methodology in chapter two, including a review of approaches to media research from previous scholars such as representation and interpretative communities. This chapter will explain how the study was conducted, including the selection of memes for analysis and the criteria used for categorizing and coding the data. Chapter three will present the findings of the analysis, highlighting the recurring themes and topics that emerge from the memes analysed, offering a detailed interpretation of their meaning and significance. Chapter four will provide a conclusion, summarizing the key findings of the study and discussing their implications for political participation and discourse in Ireland. This thesis aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by analysing the use of internet memes in Irish political discourse. By examining the ways in which memes are used to communicate political ideas and engage with contemporary issues, this study will contribute to our understanding of the role of new media technologies in shaping political participation and discourse. Additionally, this study will highlight the significance of internet memes as a tool of communication in contemporary politics, providing insights into the ways in which individuals are using new media technologies to shape the public sphere.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

1.1 - Identity and Society

Identity plays a crucial role in group dynamics, shaping individuals' sense of belonging, values, and behaviours within the collective. The formation and maintenance of a shared identity among group members can foster cohesion, cooperation, and a sense of purpose. Therefore, it is important to discuss relevant identity theories in this study to gain insight into the underlying reasons behind the impact of online communities like ISF. Understanding identity in online communities is crucial for building positive relationships and creating a sense of belonging among individuals. This becomes especially important when examining collective, social, and national identities in digital contexts. The question of identity appears in thousands of scholarly writings, the concept remains ambiguous and has become a reoccurring term used by many people in society and academia to define an array of phenomena. Identity is commonly used to understand ourselves in situations of self-representation, distinction of identity categorization, connection between behavioural and self attributes, and how we understand our ways of “being” in day-to-day life (Hezel, 2006). There are plenty of ways to theorize and understand identity, which include identifying specific categories found in culture, media and language and common indications of identity groups such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, nationality and class, all of which add to the individuality of the self in identity perception (Cover, 2016). Identity can be described as a way to define one's existence and sense of belonging. In basic terms, identity is understood as different meanings that describe who a person is when they have a specific role in society, such as their own personal characteristics or their membership in a particular group such as family, work or friendship groups (İnaç & Ünal, 2013). It is crucial to emphasize that identity is not a fixed entity but rather undergoes changes over time. Just as individuals play multiple roles in society, they also possess multiple identities. Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, a prominent scholar, lawyer, and activist known for her contributions to critical race theory and feminist theory, developed intersectionality in the late 1980s (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality recognizes that individuals experience multiple dimensions of social identity simultaneously, shaping their experiences and opportunities. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and the need to address them holistically. Crenshaw's concept highlights the

compounded and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by marginalized groups and calls for recognizing and addressing the complexities of social identities and power dynamics. Intersectionality has had a significant impact on academic disciplines, social justice movements, and policy discussions, promoting more inclusive approaches to social justice and equality (Crenshaw, 1989).

Previous studies on identity theory have associated the idea of identity with essentialist views, meaning that our identities are fixed over the course of our lives, and we inherit them from birth. A common approach to identity is that our sense of self develops during childhood by close relationships which has an impact on our personalities and behaviour. While these beliefs continue to control discussions on identity both in academia and in the media, recent discussions of identity have been met with a more constructionist outlook; where it is understood that identity is developed through social and cultural forces and change over time (Cover, 2016). Previous studies on identity theory have explained the meanings of multiple identities claimed by individuals, how identity influences thoughts, emotions and behaviour and how their identity positions people in society (Burke & Stets, 2009). An important concept of identity theory is how the individual and society are essentially linked. While the individual is the focal point of identity studies, it is important to remember that “the individual exists within the context of the social structure” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3).

Society is established “by the actions of individuals” and it is acknowledged “that these actions are produced in the context of the social structure they create and are influenced by this context” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 4). As a result, group identity has been a major topic of discussion in identity research over the years. Some popular theories often used to discuss group identities include Collective Identity and Social Identity Theory.

Researchers have noted the significance of collective identities among individuals in group memberships. Collective identity is defined as a person’s feelings of belonging and connection with other individuals in the group (Leap & Thompson, 2018).

Collective identity is related to social unification ranging from family, local communities, socio-economic class, and the nation state. A collective identity is prominent in a group when there is cohesion and shared sense of self among the group of members. Collective identities are vital for group solidarity as they define the boundaries of who belongs and does not belong in a certain group. Collective identities

are also beneficial to individuals understanding of how they should respond in certain circumstances and who they are as a person. Additionally, they help facilitate emotional obligations which create and preserve connections with others who share the same identity (Leap & Thompson, 2018). While the theory of collective identity is often used to discuss the positive aspects of group-based identity, it is important to note that not all groups include or welcome group members. Collective identity groups often exclude people based on traits or behaviours which are viewed to be outside of the group identity for example, second-generation Pakistani men, born and raised in Ireland, who have an Irish passport and Irish citizenship are not seen as “Irish” because of their ethnicity (Considine, 2016). Feelings of collective identity can arise from the theory of social identity. First proposed by psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) social identity theory is a popular hypothesis used to understand group activities and experiences. Social identity theory focuses on an individual’s identification within a social or collective group, which consists of other individuals who share similar views and feelings within that group. Members often have shared characteristics with other group members such as culture, demographics, interests or occupations (Burke & Stets, 2009). Through a process of categorization and social comparison, members who share similar characteristics are categorised as the ingroup (Us). Similarly, those who possess different characteristics from the ingroup are labelled as the outgroup (Them) and there is often competition and hostility between ingroups and outgroups (Us Vs Them). When a person identifies with a group, they incorporate that group’s characteristics into their self-concept. Possessing a specific social identity means being similar to other members in the group and seeing things from that group’s perspective. It is often presumed that group members think and behave alike, while there is homogeneity in thoughts and behaviour in being a part of a particular group (Burke & Stets, 2009). Furthermore, in media studies, scholars use the concept of othering to discuss topics like race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Ouellette & Gray, 2017). Othering is a strategy that separates and marginalizes certain individuals and groups, making them different from the mainstream. This can happen in various ways, like using language or assigning geographical labels. It also occurs in media through representation and the way audiences are treated. Othering also happens in relation to audiences, where marginalized groups are often ignored or not given proper attention. In gender and sexuality studies, there is a similar pattern of othering, where certain groups of women

are underrepresented and understudied. This process of othering is reinforced by power dynamics and leads to oppression and discrimination (Ouellette & Gray, 2017).

ISF portrays a lot of “Irishness” through their memes, as most of the members are primarily based in Ireland or identify as Irish, therefore it is important to briefly discuss Irish identity and national identity. Irish identity is complicated by the country’s colonial past and major political, cultural and social changes since the 1990s. It is difficult to outline an exact definition of Irish identity as there are multiple Irish identities, which include nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant, diasporic identities including the “New Irish” – recent immigrants who came to Ireland since 1990s and made the country their new home (Considine, 2016). Popular culture helps us to establish and understand our identities and social media users are able to construct and portray their identities online through digital participation (Cover, 2016). The concept of a national identity is also a difficult theory to define, as researchers in recent years have struggled to agree on one clear definition of national identity. To theorise the concept of national identity, previous studies on the topic have outlined national identity simply as a nation. In his research on national identity and nationalism, Anthony Smith (1991) describes a nation as a population who share common myths, economy, public culture, historic territory, legal rights and duties for all its members (Triandafyllidou, 1998). In later research on national identity, there have been further developments in defining the nation. It is described as a social organization that constantly reinterprets and reproduces memories, traditions, myths, symbols, and values, forming a unique national heritage. (Conway, 2006).

Furthermore, nations are described as socially constructed as imagined communities which are products of various political, economic and socio-cultural forces (Anderson, 2006). In his definition of the nation Anderson states that a nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 2006, p. 5). Essentially, an individual categorises themselves as a member of the national group, imagining that they share the same interests and ideologies as other group members despite not personally knowing or meeting their co-nationals in person. This type of group association provides a feeling of participation and acceptance, which promotes a sense of belonging. As an example, individuals hold

a constant mental image of their belongingness and affinity to the nation in their minds. For example, members share a feeling of nationhood when attending sporting events that their country is taking part in, by wearing Irish jerseys, waving the Irish flag or chanting Irish songs during a match (Anderson, 2006). Therefore, national identity is seen as a type of collective community established through essential ideologies and social norms which define and outline the rules of the group. However, these rules can be interpreted as controlling group members behaviours and outlining what they can and cannot value or have an interest in (Considine, 2016). The theory of national identity is outlined as a contextualised range of ideas and feelings of a group of people who share similar cultural characteristics and experiences. A person is not bound to one form of identity, they obtain numerous intricate identities that constantly change as they are shaped through an individuals' social group and close relationships throughout their lifetime. These identities are established through processes of cultural experiences from interdependent relationships, national culture and media that express certain dominant views and ideologies (Tuck, 2003). An important aspect of a nation is that it is not only political process but also as a cultural process that can be classified as a metaphorical collection of cultural symbols, representations and institutions (Considine, 2016). This creates an imagined community with a real feeling of togetherness and loyalty for group members while at the same time, advocating dominant beliefs and traditions and emphasizing the importance on individuals who belong in that group and ridiculing those who do not (Tuck, 2003). Previous studies on national identity have indicated that not all imagined communities are as accepting and inclusive of all members. National identity can be perceived as being differentiated by invisible 'boundaries' that regulate individuals' access to in group membership. These metaphorical boundaries are described as conceptualised perceptions on group identity used by social actors in order to separate in-group and out-group members into categories. Evoking feelings of togetherness with in-group members and hostility towards out-group members (Triandafyllidou, 1998).

Stuart Hall's theory of the nation and the other is based on the idea that nations are not natural or essential, but rather are constructed through historical and cultural processes that involve the exclusion and marginalization of certain groups of people (Hall, 2003). He argues that the concept of the "other" is central to the formation of national identity, as nations are defined by what they are not, as much as by what they are. According to

Hall (1997), the construction of national identity is based on the creation of a binary opposition between the self and the other, where the other is often seen as a threat to the unity and coherence of the nation. This other can take many forms, such as racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities, or even other nations that are seen as different or inferior. Hall argues that the other is not simply an external threat, but is also internal to the nation itself, as there are always groups within the nation who are excluded or marginalized because they do not fit the dominant cultural or social norms. These groups may include women, LGBTQ+ people, working-class people, and others who do not conform to the dominant cultural ideals of the nation. In order to maintain the coherence and stability of the nation, Hall argues that the other must be controlled and managed through various forms of institutional and ideological power, such as the media, the legal system, and educational institutions (Hall, 2003). These institutions work to define and enforce the boundaries of national identity, and to exclude those who do not fit within these boundaries. Hall's theory of the nation and the other highlights the ways in which national identity is constructed through exclusion and marginalization, and how this process is shaped by power relations within society. It also emphasizes the importance of recognizing and challenging the ways in which the other is constructed and controlled, in order to create more inclusive and just societies (Hall, 2003). In the context of the Irish Republic, the apparent boundaries are what defines someone as Irish and who is non-Irish. The type of person who is often considered Irish is usually white and has Irish ancestry, while those who are considered non-Irish are often categorised as such because of their race, ethnicity or religious beliefs (Considine, 2016). In his study, *Migration and the Making of Ireland* (2018), Bryan Fanning discusses the long history of racism and xenophobia in Ireland towards not only the Irish abroad but also towards minority populations in Ireland. This racism was present during the founding of the State and was evident in anti-Semitism and anti-Traveller racism. Ireland's 'new racism' emerged during the Celtic Tiger years and was based on a fear of immigrants and visible minorities. The amendment to Irish citizenship laws in 2004 has led to a re-racialization of the Irish State, where being Irish is now equated with being White and having Irish heritage. This means that individuals from non-White groups who are Irish may not be recognized as such. The process of nation building in Ireland has resulted in the creation of specific Irish national identities that exclude ethnic minorities from making claims to nationhood (Fanning, 2018).

1.2 - Ireland's Political Landscape

For years, the Republic of Ireland has been seen as an archaic nation fixed in the ways of the past. In present day depictions of Ireland in film and advertising, the country is still frequently represented as an agrarian society rooted in conservative ideology and Celtic mythology, where most of the population live in rural areas with no experience of the modern world (O'Boyle, 2018). However, since the 1990s, the Republic of Ireland's cultural, political, and socio-economic landscape has experienced radical transformation. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a full political history of the Irish State since inception so this section will refer primarily to changes in Ireland's political and socio-cultural landscape after 1990. The "Celtic Tiger" refers to an era of swift economic growth in Ireland between the years of 1995 – 2007 and was the driving force behind Ireland's cultural and economic transformation (Zamorano-Llena, 2017). The phrase first appeared in an *Irish Times* business report in September 1994 written by economist Kevin Gardiner. The report was an in depth look into the growth of Ireland's market economy and was published by the London branch of American financial institution Morgan Stanley (McCann, 2013) Gardiner created the term to praise Ireland's stock market and compared it to the "East Asian Tigers", a period of economic growth in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong in the 1980s (McCann, 2013). For most of the 20th century Ireland was seen as a backwater and poverty-stricken nation because of its colonial past and the slow growth of new State (Kirby, 2010). However, Ireland quickly transformed from one of the EU's poorest economies to the forefront of the world's wealthiest nations. After a prolonged recession during the 1980s that saw high unemployment rates, high emigration and failing living standards., the country entered the 1990s with a newly elected government with neoliberal ideas to welcome foreign investment and free-market principles into the new decade (Rob, et al., 2012).

The Fianna Fáil government along with the Industrial Development Agency (IDA) played a key role in the rise of the Celtic Tiger by promoting Ireland's economy to foreign companies, through low corporate tax rates, low labour costs, skilled workforce, grants, and pathways to other European markets (White, 2013). This led to the development of a consumer-focused society, growth in the manufacturing and service sectors, housing, and a property boom along with the growing construction sector and rising immigration due to the country's rising living standards and work opportunities

(Rob, et al., 2012). By the early 2000s, Ireland had become a modern, neoliberal utopia with upscale shopping centres, lavish apartment buildings and multiple suburban estates built up and down the country (Maher & O'Brien, 2018). However, in September 2008, Ireland's economic prosperity came to a grinding halt with the crash of the Celtic Tiger. Fuelled by excessive lending and irresponsible credit arrangements by Irish banks combined with corporate greed, Ireland fell into one of the worst recessions the state has experienced since the 1950s (McCann, 2013). The economic collapse was felt throughout Irish society affecting those in business and as well as families. There were record levels of unemployment with over a hundred job losses per day and 400,000 claiming jobseekers' benefits. Many "Tiger" based industries such as construction (McCann, 2013) and property development went bankrupt leaving behind hundreds of house developments unfinished or abandoned leading to the development of "Ghost Estates", areas of housing with more than 50% of the properties vacant or unfinished (McIntyre, 2021). Families were left unable to pay their mortgage, afford food or school supplies. Staggering rates of emigration saw people leaving the country in search of work opportunities and better standards of living (McCann, 2013). With the fragility of Ireland's banking sector becoming more apparent, the government stepped in to guarantee that all loans issued to Irish banks would be covered, with private debt becoming public debt as it was covered by the State. However, this proved insufficient as the Irish state would spend the next two years putting public money into the financial institutions and still being unable to pay off the large debt of €64 billion (Coulter, et al., 2019). By November 2010, while on verge of bankruptcy, the Irish government applied for financial assistance from the European Central Bank, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also known as the 'Troika' (Coulter, et al., 2019). Troika issued the Irish government an emergency loan of over €67.5 billion. However, the terms of the this "bailout" included punitive interest rates to be paid to European banks and allowed the lending institutions to control government capital and the running of day-to-day state activities (Coulter, et al., 2019). The Troika bailout is seen as one of the most catastrophic events "to have been inflicted on the Irish people since independence" (Moran, 2019, p. 177) and see the introduction of austerity measures that would greatly afflict Irish society over the coming years (Coulter, et al., 2019). A four-year recovery plan was recommended, and a cycle of austerity budgets cutbacks were implemented (Keohane & Kuhling, 2018).

Honohan (2017) describes austerity as “an approach to economic policy that squeezes the role of government to the minimum and calls on individuals and firms to be self-reliant and disciplined in their financial planning as a supposed prerequisite for successful long-term economic performance.” (Honohan, 2017, p. xvii). While others define austerity as a set of policies implemented to reduce government debt through a combination of tax increases and spending cuts (Moore-Cherry, et al., 2017). These budget cuts and tax increases affect the most at-risk social groups such as the unemployed, elderly and the disabled. The majority of the spending cuts in the 2012 Irish budget affected the most vulnerable in Irish society with cuts in child benefit and school allowances, cuts in disability and jobseekers’ payments, cuts in fuel and rent allowance and as well as reductions or abolishment of community employment schemes. There were also tax increases to the motor tax and the household charge as well as a planned re-introduction of third-level college fees. In summary, during the 2012 budget there was a total of €2.2 billion cuts in spending and €1.6 billion in tax increase widening the gap between richest and poorest groups in Ireland (Allen, 2017). After the crash, there was a great deal of arguments in the Irish media and among political discourses on who was to blame for the economic downturn (O’Flynn, et al., 2014). Several politicians tried to spread the blame as wide as possible, that Ireland “decided as a people, collectively, to have this property boom” - “we all share part of the responsibility for the position we are in” and “the Irish people ‘all went a bit mad with borrowing” (O’Flynn, et al., 2014, p. 926). There was also a popular theme of blaming the recession on the unionised public sector workers (chance to attack workers and unions and undermine their wages and work conditions) and those reliant on social welfare benefits such as the unemployed, immigrants and the disabled generating ideological class warfare, justifying legitimising austerity policies, and normalising inequality throughout Ireland’s socio-economic landscape (O’Flynn, et al., 2014). In March 2012, further information about the corrupt nature of those in power during the Celtic Tiger years became public (McCann, 2013). Titled “The Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments” or better known as the “Mahon Report” is 3,270-page report detailing “the lack of an ethical compass within a financial and political environment that nurtured and promoted corruption in its attempt to force the economy into a formula for Gross Domestic Product (GDP) economic growth without recourse to social constraints” (McCann, 2013, p. 119). The report disclosed and

criticised Ireland's economic growth plan and those who ran the country while neglecting democratic responsibility. Politicians, bankers, property developers, lawyers etc were exposed as corrupt and abusing their power by embezzlement of public and party funds, misuse of public expenditure and tax evasion. The release of the Mahon Report outlined how poorly the Irish government had managed the Celtic Tiger economy and while government officials were publicly shamed, some did not feel the consequences of their actions no further investigation into possible criminal convictions, and several politicians resigning before they could be expelled (McCann, 2013).

The impact of austerity measures on Ireland's housing has been enduring, with the emergence of a crisis in housing affordability resulting in housing shortages, long public housing waiting lists, and a surge in homelessness. (van Lanen, 2019). The housing crisis had become a prominent public issue, leading to an increase in social protests as a response to economic recession and neoliberal austerity policies. The wave of housing activism that mobilized thousands of Irish people struggling to afford or keep their homes. As the housing crisis worsened, there was a shift from resilience towards more direct forms of resistance in contemporary urban political struggle (Lima, 2021). The financial crisis also had a significant impact on the generation of young people transitioning into adulthood at the time. Employment opportunities declined, social welfare payments decreased, education and training grants were reduced, and household incomes fell. Rising rents and disinvestment in social housing also made it difficult for young people to move into independent housing.

These effects of the crisis, recession, and austerity had severe impacts on young people's future prospects, particularly for those from low-income households. Austerity had interrupted youth's transition into adulthood, affecting their labour market positions, health, and social inclusion (van Lanen, 2021). The economic crisis led to major changes in Ireland's structural conditions. The Irish government used the crisis as an opportunity to implement reforms in the domestic water regime. This involved creating links between national, European, and international politics, and negotiating an €85 billion bailout package with the Troika. As a condition of the bailout, the government agreed to move towards full cost-recovery in the provision of water services. This led to the introduction of water charges in 2014, which became a pivotal issue in Irish austerity politics (Trommer, 2019). The Irish people were praised for accepting the

social and economic hardship induced by cutbacks. However, by 2011, a growing anti-austerity movement emerged, arguing that the burden of Europe's banking debt had fallen on the Irish public while the ruling elite had lost little. This frustration culminated in the water charges protests from 2014 to 2015, which built on the foundations of previous anti-austerity struggles. The protests mobilized working-class communities, including parts of the trade union movement and left political parties, creating an unprecedented working-class alliance. The movement became the anti-austerity movement, where non-payment of bills, blockading of water meter installations, and huge protests offered concrete actions that people could participate in (Moore, 2022). The anti-austerity movement was driven by a combination of factors, including the regressive nature of austerity budgets, the horizontal nature of water charges, previous experience with water and non-payment campaigns, and anger about corruption among the Irish political and economic elite (Trommer, 2019).

The anti-austerity movement paved the way for the emergence of a left-leaning voter base in the country. The next few years saw the success of two progressive referendums by a significant margin - the 2015 Marriage Equality Referendum and the 2018 Abortion Referendum. The Marriage Equality Referendum made Ireland the first country to allow marriage equality in its written constitution and legalize same-sex marriage through a national referendum. This event marked a turning point for Ireland from being one of the most socially conservative countries in Western Europe to a more progressive and diverse state. The referendum had a 60.52% turnout rate, with 62.07% of voters in favour and 37.93% against. In May 2018, Irish citizens voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which banned almost all abortions. Voter turnout for this referendum was 64.13%, with a 66.4% vote in favour and 33.6% against, making it the fourth-highest turnout for any referendum in Irish history (Fiorella, 2022). Young voters played a significant role in defining the central focus of both referendums, indicating the future direction of the country's politics. In both referendums, young people turned out in large numbers, showing their support for progressive causes, and influencing the outcome of the votes. Their engagement and activism on these issues demonstrated their commitment to a more liberal and inclusive society. The success of these referendums, driven largely by young voters, signalled a shift towards a more progressive and diverse Ireland, where social issues are prioritised and addressed through democratic means (Munley, et al., 2023). Despite these small

steps, there are still significant issues around housing, health and unemployment. Furthermore, Ireland has failed to create a universal and integrated pluralist society, specifically prejudice against the Travelling community and public attitudes towards refugees. Over the past few decades, Ireland has made significant progress towards becoming a more progressive society. The legalization of same-sex marriage, the repeal of the Eighth Amendment, and the growing recognition of diversity and multiculturalism all serve as positive indicators of this societal shift. However, there is still much work to be done to address the social, economic, and political issues in the country (Independent.ie, 2019).

1.3 - Political Discourse

Michel Foucault, a philosopher, and sociologist developed the concept of discourse in the 1960s as a system of intertwined knowledge and power that shapes our understanding of reality. Discourse encompasses rules, assumptions, and practices that determine what can be said, thought, and understood within a social context (Ouellette & Gray, 2017). It establishes boundaries of acceptable knowledge, shapes perception, and reflects power relations. Discourses create norms, categories, and hierarchies, defining what is true, normal, or valuable in society. Foucault emphasizes that discourses are not neutral but serve specific interests and can be productive in generating knowledge and controlling behaviour. His analysis challenges fixed notions of knowledge, revealing its connection to power and historical contingencies. Understanding discourse involves critically examining power dynamics, questioning assumptions, and striving for inclusive knowledge and social organization. Foucault's concept intersects with power, knowledge, and disciplinary practices, providing a framework for resistance and transformation (Ouellette & Gray, 2017).

The definition of political discourse is complex and has different interpretations, which is often understood as speech activity aimed at promoting certain ideas and motivating people towards political actions (Dugalich, 2018). However, a broad definition of political discourse should include full participation in the domain of politics, such as the public, the masses, citizens, and other groups or categories. Therefore, it is not just professional politicians who are involved in politics. People as citizens and voters, members of pressure and issue groups, and demonstrators may also take part in the political process and engage in political discourse. Categorization of people and groups should be strict, meaning their members are only participants in political discourse when they act as political actors. Political texts and contexts mutually define each other, meaning political encounters are characterized by accomplishing specific political aims and goals. Political discourse is considered a form of political action and part of the political process. It is viewed as a form of social action and interaction, which includes both spoken and written communication. Political action by text and talk is not limited to producing or perceiving discourse in political contexts and by political actors, but also requires certain conditions to be met. Discourse is only considered political when it is part of the parliamentary debate, for the record, and relevant to the business at hand (Van Dijk, 1997). Political communication plays an important role in conveying

information to citizens, regulating human behaviour, and shaping public opinion. Political discourse is the sphere where the language of politics is used, and it comprises social context, speech production and perception, and background knowledge (V. Seredina & V. Dekhnich, 2022). The internet has created new digital spaces for political discourse, expanding the traditional understanding of political engagement. This has resulted in the emergence of counter-public spheres where marginalized voices can come together to articulate their ideas. However, online political discussions are not always democratic or deliberative, as users tend to interact only with like-minded individuals, creating a polarizing effect. This is referred to as echo chambers, a phenomenon where individuals engage with and consume information primarily from sources that reinforce their existing beliefs, opinions, and values (Garimella, et al., 2018). In other words, people are surrounded by like-minded individuals and news sources, resulting in a self-reinforcing loop of confirmation bias. Echo chambers can occur in a variety of online spaces, including social media platforms, news websites, and discussion forums. They can be particularly prevalent in political discourse, where individuals may gravitate towards sources that align with their political views and avoid engaging with opposing viewpoints. The problem with echo chambers is that they can exacerbate polarization and hinder the open exchange of ideas and viewpoints, making it difficult to have productive conversations and find common ground (Garimella, et al., 2018). Online political speech can also be uncivil, particularly when commenters are anonymous leading to online harassment and abuse. Social media platforms have been criticised for their failure to adequately address online harassment and hate speech, which can have a chilling effect on political discourse and limit the participation of marginalized groups. Social media platforms are not necessarily democratic spaces, as the fragmentation of conversations and information overload can lead to confusion (Harlow, et al., 2020). Fake news and misinformation are also major challenges to political discourse on the internet. The ease of sharing information on social media has made it easy for fake news to spread rapidly, leading to the spread of conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation. This can have serious implications for public opinion and decision-making (Riebling & von der Wense, 2019). The internet has increased the amount and availability of political content, leading to debates about the quality of the newly surfaced online discourse. While some believe that the internet could promote deliberative exchange of ideas, sceptics remain doubtful. Studies show

that the majority of internet users do not access public affairs information online, and surveys reveal that internet users mainly engage with groups or websites associated with their hobbies. Political conversation in explicitly political chat rooms and message boards reinforces like-minded political views and makes limited contributions to promoting cross-cutting discourse (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). However, political discussions that occur within non-political online groups frequently involve participants who disagree with each other, which exposes participants to dissimilar perspectives. Therefore, non-politically motivated exchanges online can be promising in promoting political discussions among people with diverse views. Incidental political talk in non-political online spaces is more common than anticipated and can expose participants to political disagreement (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). In Ireland, Suiter and Flynn (2021) conducted a study on the impact of digital media on political discourse in Ireland. They found that the advent of social media and the development of a mixed media system have caused a shift in the balance of power between Irish politicians and journalists. Politicians have now become the principal “gatekeepers”, with the responsibility of controlling the information flow. Journalism is facing the challenge of adjusting to the limited resources available in this situation, while governments are struggling to regulate the social media landscape. As younger generations in Ireland rely more on social media for news and political updates, it is probable that political activities will increasingly take place on these platforms. (Suiter & Flynn, 2021). Therefore, it is important to understand political discourse through user generated content like memes.

1.4 - Participatory Culture

Participatory culture refers to the phenomenon of active involvement and engagement of individuals in the creation and dissemination of culture, media, and information. In recent years, online participatory culture has become increasingly prevalent due to advancements in digital technology and the widespread availability of the internet. This resulted in a shift from traditional forms of media consumption, where individuals are receivers of information in a primarily one-way flow, to a more collaborative and interactive approach to media production and consumption (Waldron, 2013). Henry Jenkins, a prominent media scholar, has extensively studied participatory culture and its impact on society (Jenkins, 2006). He defines participatory culture as one that has low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others, and some type of informal mentorship where what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. Jenkins argues that participatory culture allows for increased creativity, innovation, and diversity in cultural production, and provides individuals with a greater sense of agency and empowerment. Jenkins further identifies the key attributes of participatory culture as collective intelligence, a belief in the power of communities to collaborate and pool their knowledge resources to achieve common goals, and networked communication, which enables individuals to connect and communicate with others across different platforms and contexts. He also emphasizes the importance of remix culture, where individuals are encouraged to take existing media content and rework it to create new and innovative forms of media (Jenkins, 2006). Christian Fuchs, another media scholar, has also explored the concept of participatory culture from a critical perspective (Fuchs, 2014). Fuchs argues that while participatory culture has the potential to empower individuals and promote democratic values, it is often limited by the dominant capitalist and neoliberal structures that shape the media and cultural industries. He contends that the participatory culture is not inherently democratic or liberatory, but rather a product of the current economic and social conditions. Fuchs identifies several challenges and contradictions within participatory culture, including the commodification of creativity and the exploitation of labour by media companies. He argues that platforms such as YouTube and Facebook rely on user-generated content to generate profits while offering little in return to content creators. Furthermore, Fuchs asserts that the democratizing potential of participatory culture is limited by the digital divide, which excludes those

without access to digital technology and internet connectivity (Fuchs, 2014). Despite these challenges, participatory culture has the potential to transform the way individuals engage with culture and media. The emergence of social media and other digital platforms has enabled individuals to create, share and consume media in ways that were previously impossible. This has resulted in the democratization of media production and consumption, with individuals having greater control over the content they consume and create (Waldron, 2013) The unstable social and political conditions of the last 10 years (i.e. the rise of the far-right, Brexit and civil protests such as Occupy Wall Street and the Black Lives Matter movement) have seen a huge increase in political participation from all sides of the political spectrum. These events have significantly influenced the political landscape and have had major effects on governance, international relations, and public discourse (Pedwell, 2019).

1.5 - Public Sphere

Predating the theories of participatory culture is the concept of the public sphere that refers to the space in which individuals come together to engage in rational discourse and debate on matters of public interest. This space is seen as essential for the functioning of democratic societies, as it allows for the exchange of ideas and perspectives, and the development of informed opinions and decisions. The idea of the public sphere was first developed by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in the 1960s and has since been the subject of much scholarly debate and discussion (Brinkmann, et al., 2022). The emergence of the internet in recent decades has significantly impacted the concept of the public sphere. While traditional forms of media such as newspapers, television, and radio have historically played a crucial role in shaping public discourse, the internet has introduced new forms of communication and interaction that have expanded the possibilities for public engagement (Schlesinger, 2022). On the one hand, the internet has provided individuals with new tools and platforms for engaging in public discourse. Social media, in particular, has allowed for the rapid dissemination of information and the creation of online communities where individuals can share their views and engage in discussions with others. Online forums and comment sections on news articles have also provided spaces for individuals to voice their opinions and engage in debates (Wollebæk, et al., 2019). However, the internet has also posed significant challenges to the functioning of the public sphere. One of the key issues is the problem of information overload and the spread of misinformation. The sheer volume of information available online, combined with the ease of sharing information, has made it increasingly difficult for individuals to discern fact from fiction. This has led to the spread of conspiracy theories and fake news, which can have serious implications for public opinion and decision-making (Chambers, 2021). Another challenge is the problem of echo chambers and filter bubbles. The internet has made it easy for individuals to access information that aligns with their existing beliefs and perspectives, while filtering out opposing viewpoints. This can lead to the polarization of public opinion, as individuals become more entrenched in their views and less open to alternative perspectives (Wollebæk, et al., 2019). Finally, the internet has also posed challenges to the inclusivity and accessibility of the public sphere. While the internet has provided opportunities for marginalized groups to have their voices heard and to engage in public discourse, it has also highlighted issues of digital divide and unequal

access to technology. Those without access to the internet or digital literacy skills may be excluded from the public sphere, limiting their ability to engage in public debate and decision-making (Rasmussen, 2014). Public spaces on the internet are also marked by considerable hostility often directed at women and marginal groups. Despite these challenges, the internet has also opened up new possibilities for the public sphere. Online platforms have provided spaces for the mobilization of social and political movements, allowing individuals to come together to advocate for change and hold those in power accountable. The internet has also provided opportunities for individuals to engage in participatory culture and to create and share media that reflects their diverse experiences and perspectives (Schlesinger, 2022).

1.6 - The Birth of Memes

The phrase “meme” was first introduced by ethologist and biologist Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Released in 1976, the book explains Dawkins evolutionary theory in relation to cultural exchange. The word meme comes from the Ancient Greek word “mimema”, which means “something which is imitated”. Dawkins was influenced by the word when coming up with a word to describe his evolutionary theory and shortened it to meme, which rhymes with gene (Dawkins, 1976). In his original writings, Dawkins described memes as small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, that spread from person to person by copying or imitation. Some examples of memes that Dawkins presented were described as cultural artefacts, such as music, stories, fashion, ideas, behaviour and religious beliefs. Like its counterpart, genes, memes are described as replicators that go through competition, variation, selection and retention. Memes often compete for the attention of hosts, however some memes can go extinct if they are not suited to a particular sociocultural environment, while the rest disseminate successfully and strengthen throughout the process (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkin’s meme theory later generated into memetics, which is the study of “theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes” (Shifman, 2014, p. 10). In memetics, a meme is considered the cultural equivalent of a flu, which transmits through communication. However, this metaphor was seen as problematic as it reduced cultural exchange to merely a biological process that simplified complex human behaviour, inferring that people are merely passive and defenceless individuals. Furthermore, the transmission of culture should not be seen as a one-way process through individuals acting as mere carriers. Instead, people should be regarded as active participants driving cultural exchange. The propagation of memes is facilitated by individuals who possess influential decision-making capabilities, and can shape ideas and societal norms, which is a vital aspect of the memetic process. Furthermore, as cultural ideas are disseminated, their meanings can undergo changes (Shifman, 2014). In today’s era of convergence culture, a meme is used to describe the circulation of media artefacts such as images, videos, rumours and jokes from person to person through the internet. Among online users, internet memes encapsulate the foundation of modern digital culture. As with most participatory online applications, internet memes spread from user to user and also influence and express social attitudes in contemporary society (Milner, 2016). Memes are a form of cultural reproduction

driven by replication processes that an essential aspect of digital and participatory culture and play an important part in “defining events of the twenty-first century” (Shifman, 2014, p. 6). One of the fundamental aspects of an internet meme is their range of user-generated products presented in comedic fashion through imitation, mashups and remixes. Additionally, internet memes are known for their intertextuality where memes that seem different from others correlate with each other in creative and intricate ways (Milner, 2013).

1.7 - Meme Properties

Early academic interest in memes focused on the topic in relation to Biology, Anthropology and Psychology. It wasn't until the last fifteen years where scholarly interest in memes focused on the topic in relation to communication and digital culture. This is no surprise as the original concept of memes was created long before the modern era of internet culture. However, some aspects of early meme theory still relate to modern memes and are more omnipresent and conventional thanks to unique features of digital culture. In Dawkins original evaluation, he explained that in order to disseminate successfully they need to include three fundamental characteristics – longevity, fecundity and copy fidelity (Shifman, 2014). In contemporary culture, these basic properties have strengthened on the internet -

- Copy Fidelity: Internet memes have higher accuracy compared to other forms of communication as digitalization allows information to transfer easily.
- Fecundity: The internet allows quick dissemination of a wide range of media artefacts and information at any time.
- Longevity: The internet and online applications can store information indefinitely.

However, the extent of internet meme diffusion is only the beginning of memes and digital culture compatibility. What Dawkins would not have expected when he came up with his original theory in the mid-1970s is that and to reiterate from earlier, memes have become an essential aspect of digital and participatory culture. To explain the relevance of internet memes in modern digital culture, it's important to discuss the three primary attributes of a meme that have strengthened in modern society:

1. Memes gradually spread among people throughout society.
2. They reproduce through duplication and imitation.
3. Memes disseminate through selection and competition.

Memes are often described as items of cultural information that spread from person to person but steadily grow into a shared social phenomenon. While they disseminate on a small level, they can have a huge impact where they can form the mindsets and influence the behaviour and actions of individuals and social groups. This feature of memes fits in with the way culture is shared in digital society as a primary aspect of

Web 2.0 is the creating and sharing of user generated content on online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Popular online applications rely on the spread of content, created by users and shared by users to other users and the smallest amount of information can grow to mass levels in a short number of hours (Shifman, 2014). In the book *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture* (2019), Wiggins discusses the importance of discourse in digital culture and how it is constructed by human agents. They also discuss the power of discourse, and how it constrains and directs what humans can understand and articulate about a particular field of knowledge or subject matter. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, he emphasizes the duality of social relations and the importance of discursive formations (Wiggins, 2019). Discourse is seen as synonymous with ideology, a system of knowledge and behaviours that directs and constrains communication. The discourse of memes refers specifically to the power of internet memes in digital culture, which constitutes ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality. Internet memes are viewed as a way to observe discourse in action, and any given meme expresses an ideological practice that relies on semiotic constructions and intertextuality to achieve meaning. Discourse is a synonym for ideology, but they make a distinction between the two concepts by emphasizing that discourse is defined by communication and is purposeful, while ideology is ideational (Wiggins, 2019).

Ideology connects a person to the world and vice versa, and individuals express themselves according to a particular worldview regardless of how sophisticated or base it may be. Ideology serves to reproduce the social conditions required for the continuation of a socio-economic system. Internet memes contain a semiotic meaning which is tethered to an ideological practice. The function of ideology is to guide behaviour, direct it in ways preferred by the dominant mode or group. An internet meme cannot exist without referring to something other than the subject matter it contains. The intertextual relationship between the various images and texts used in memes can be constructed in part through deliberate semiotic choices in the interest of making meaning (Wiggins, 2019). In *The Internet is for Cats*, (2023) author Jessica Maddox states that there is a complex relationship between online visual content and the toxicity of internet culture. On one hand, the internet can be a source of cute and wholesome content, while on the other hand, it can perpetuate harm against marginalized individuals (Maddox, 2023). These seemingly contradictory phenomena can coexist and are an important aspect of contemporary digital culture. To better understand this

relationship, Maddox examines pet and animal images and practices from the perspectives of Cultural and Internet Studies. Cultural Studies emphasize the importance of investigating everyday practices, which can reveal underlying power structures and untapped potentials. Meanwhile, Internet Studies emphasize the need to understand the intersection of online practices and societal issues. Maddox argues that pet and animal images produce, and are produced by, specific types of sociality and digital culture practices. They are the defining, intertwining, and organizing strands from which they analyse this visual culture (Maddox, 2023). Additionally, cute visual content can provide temporary relief from the toxicity of digital spaces, but this relief is fleeting and not a permanent solution. Visual culture refers to the relationship between what is seen, and the names given to what is seen. It involves active and contextual processes that go beyond just recording sight in a one-to-one ratio. To analyse visual culture, it is important to situate it between visibility and practice and to consider how people create, share, consume, and respond to images or image-based materials. Social media visual cultures are constructed and practiced in specific ways in specific contexts, involving aesthetics and iconographies, but visual culture cannot be reduced to any one entity. Visual culture involves the active creation, sharing, consumption, and response to images and image-based materials. Visual contents are constructed and practiced in specific ways with their own modes of sociality (Maddox, 2023).

1.8 - Early Memes

As evident from Dawkin's analysis, memes have always been a part of human society and contrary to belief, did not come with the development of the internet. However, the era of new media has transformed some integral features of cultural memes (Milner, 2016). But before we can look at how contemporary society revolutionized cultural memes, we need to discuss an earlier example of a meme that began the trend of sharing and imitation of funny imagery. A veteran meme in non-digital format and appeared almost fifty years before the creation of the internet was "Kilroy was Here". Kilroy Was Here features a drawing of a bald man with a long nose overlooking a wall with his hands clutched over on either side, along with the caption "Kilroy was here". The appearance of Kilroy was popular during World War II where he was often found on walls, armoured vehicles and other surfaces scribbled by weary soldiers frazzled by the war efforts and desired some form of humour and inspiration (World Wars Magazine, 2020).



Figure 1 - Engraving of Kilroy Was Here

Over the course of the second World War, Kilroy made an appearance in all corners of the globe and became a symbol of the presence of American soldiers in areas of war. Images of Kilroy appeared at beachheads stormed by American military forces and found etched on seized American fighting equipment which convinced leaders such as Adolf Hitler that the name Kilroy was in reference to a spy who was supplying secrets to the American side of the war (Strauss, 2019). Kilroy even made his way to the 1945, Potsdam Conference in Germany (World Wars Magazine, 2020), where the three heads of state from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the United Kingdom and

the USA gathered to discuss the terms and peace treaties for the end of World War II (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). Rumours say that while USSR leader Josef Stalin came across a drawing of Kilroy on one of the walls of his specially reserved bathroom. Stalin asked his advisors who Kilroy was, and he was so unsettled by this mysterious caricature that he ordered the Soviet secret police to find the culprit of the drawing and have them assassinated (Strauss, 2019). It seems not even some of the top world leaders were safe from the presence of Kilroy and it was no surprise that the meme would eventually make its way into popular culture (World Wars Magazine, 2020). "Haredevil Hare", a 1948 Looney Tunes cartoon starring Bugs Bunny and featuring the first appearance of Marvin the Martian sees the mischievous Bugs Bunny being forced on the first rocket ship expedition to the moon. After arriving on the moon's surface, Bugs walks around and speculates that he is the first living creature to set foot on the moon while he walks by a large rock with the words "Kilroy was here" etched on it (Strauss, 2019).



Figure 2 - Looney Tunes episode *Haredevil Hare* (1948).

Even though, "Kilroy was Here" became a legend among thousands of soldiers during World War II, its origins are not entirely clear. However, it's speculated that Kilroy shares some similarities with well-known British and Australian cartoons. Around the time Kilroy was appearing in surprising places in the USA and throughout areas of war, a similar caricature was making its mark in England known as "Mr Chad" (Strauss, 2019). Just like Kilroy, Mr Chad featured a doodle of a bald man with a long nose peeking over a wall. However, unlike the "Kilroy was here" saying, the text that

featured alongside Mr Chad included sayings such “Wot? No bread?” or “Wot? No tea?”. Mr Chad became an icon used by British citizens to express their thoughts on rationing and other hardships they endured during World War II (World Wars Magazine, 2020). Regardless of the number of years since World War II, Kilroy remains an iconic caricature and it’s not surprising that there have been several claims to the creation of Kilroy was here. However, a number of academics give credit to James J. Kilroy, as the original creator of Kilroy was here. James J Kilroy worked as an inspector at the Bethlehem Steel shipyard in Quincy, Massachusetts. Kilroy’s job was to examine the work done on the tanks and hulls of warships after riveters completed their shifts (World Wars Magazine, 2020). To keep track of his inspections, he began marking inspected areas with the phrase “Kilroy Was Here.” After a while, soldiers started to notice strange phrase and without knowing its true meaning, began to doodle the slogan wherever they went and eventually adding the drawing of a bald man with a big nose – leading to the birth of a global icon (Strauss, 2019).

1.9 - Modern Memes

The emergence of the modern digital era has drastically altered how we communicate and exchange information (Holland, 2020). According to sociologist Sherry Turkle in her book *Life on the Screen*, (1995) the internet has provided an opportunity for people to create new kinds of communities that are usually difficult to build in offline spaces. Turkle's work investigated the social impacts of digital communication and established the emergence of the Internet as a new social space, emphasising the importance of community participation (Turkle, 2003). Earlier communication sources such as newspapers and television primarily featured a one-way system where the content was made by producers in power who communicate news and their ideologies to the public. The internet allows users to be both the consumers and producers. Instead of merely consuming information provided to them by controlling institutions and the mass media, the public changes from being spectators to participants when using online platforms (Holland, 2020). The internet has provided a place where millions of people across the globe can share and discuss information and ideas. Additionally, the internet has provided a range of new tools that helped to bring about the creation and dissemination of a new type of meme, different from their original biological characterization and what is now known as the internet meme (Ayele, 2020). The difference between traditional non-digital memes (i.e religion) and internet memes is the speed of dissemination. Online memes, which we will describe as online artefacts can mutate and spread into thousands of copies across the world in a short amount of time (Holland, 2020). These media artefacts have certain features and a mix of practices. Shifman (2014) argues that both offline and online memes can be described as social phenomena that reproduce different means of imitation and diffusion through competition and selection. However, she further states that human agency is vital to understanding online memes as they are spread and transform by online users and become part of a shared cultural experience (Shifman, 2014). One of the main reasons why internet memes are so popular is because they allow users to create their own meaning from the same online artefact, a specific feature in one online artefact can have a different meaning from one person to another. Similar to any other kind of media texts like film and books, users interpret and use online artefacts in a variety of different ways. The success of online artefacts is down to their emotional resonance with users. Users share online artefacts not because they feel like they have to, but because they feel some form

of emotional attachment to certain features of the online artefact they are engaging with (Miltner, 2017). Online artefacts can come in a wide variety of forms, such as images, text or video and are influenced from multiple sources, such celebrities, news or popular televisions series and films. However, while these online artefacts come under the classification of an “Internet meme”, they all come in under specific categories, with their own styles, structures, rules, topics and intended audiences (Holland, 2020). Ranging from viral videos to cat pictures, there are a range of different types of internet memes (Shifman, 2014). However, for the sake of this research we will briefly discuss two common types of online artefacts known as reaction memes and image macros.

1.10 - Reaction Memes and Image Macros

Photo editing software such as Adobe Photoshop and other editing applications are a crucial element of online humour (Miltner, 2018). As this kind of software is easy to access and simple to use, internet users are able to create reaction memes or “reaction photoshops” to express their thoughts and emotions to certain situation or react to something that was said (Holland, 2020). Shifman describes these type of memes as “composed images created in response to memetic photos - that provoke extensive creative reactions” (Shifman, 2014, p. 102). One of the first reaction memes that spread across the internet was the “9/11 Tourist Guy”. Shortly after the attack of the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11th, 2001, a picture of man standing on an observation deck overlooking New York, with an airplane coming towards him, was widely shared across internet news sites and online forums. Rumour had it that this photo was found in a camera amongst the wreckage of the World Trade Centre. The photo sparked heated internet conspiracy theories on whether if the photo was real or not. Soon it was apparent that the photo was a hoax, leading to an array of reaction memes being shared throughout the internet of the “9/11 tourist guy”, present at tragic historical events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy and in famous scenes from popular films such as the Titanic (1997) and The Matrix (1999) (Know Your Meme, 2014).



Figure 3 - 9/11 Tourist Guy Memes

Other types of reaction memes include reaction images or a reaction GIF (Graphics Interchange Format), which have a similar representation as emoticons or emojis where users use a mix of text or a small image to depict facial or emotional expression to express their reaction to something (Know Your Meme, 2020). Reaction images and

GIFS are widely used across social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram where users post them alongside status updates or comments to communicate an emotion and add context to particular situations (Atanasova, 2016).



Figure 4 - Examples of Reaction memes

Popular on subculture websites like Reddit and 4chan, an image macro features an image with text superimposed on the top and bottom of the image (Holland, 2020). Image macros are created using a set of stock character images and portray certain stereotypical behaviours (Shifman, 2014). Most image macros feature uppercase font known as “Impact”, and the font is commonly in white with a black outline. This style of font is eye catching, easy to read and draws in the viewer and also easy to imitate which is a large contributor to its success (Holland, 2020). The text on an image macro usually features a catchphrase or a witty comment. Often used on discussion forums like Reddit and social media websites, image macros are used to convey a user’s emotions or their reaction to a particular post or person (Atanasova, 2016).



Figure 5 - Image Macro

Early forms image macros commonly featured adorable animals. One of the first featured a smiling puppy's face on top of a rainbow wheel background which is widely known as "Advice Dog" (Denisova, 2019). The meme was accompanied by two lines of text written at the top and bottom which communicated terrible advice or guidance on a particular subject. "Advice Dog" prompted a range of imitations known as "Advice Animals" which featured an animal's head with a colour wheel background (Holland, 2020). Each "Advice Animal" had its own archetype personality (Shifman, 2014) such as the aggressive "Courage Wolf" or the shy "Socially Awkward Penguin" and all featured the same two-line image macros template (Know Your Meme, 2020). While commonly categorised as "advice animals," they did not always featured advice, with some of these online artefacts featuring condescending remarks or a story about how a user reacted to a particular situation (Shifman, 2014).



Figure 6 - Advice Dog

Over time, human characters became the main feature of image macros-based memes and like their animal predecessors featured stereotypical behaviours based on the types of images used. Human macro memes included the irresponsible and antisocial “Scumbag Steve”, the overenthusiastic and clueless “College Freshman” and the hypocritical “College Liberal” (Shifman, 2014).



Figure 7 - Scumbag Steve and College Liberal

As time went on and the use of the internet became more and more mainstream, and online artefacts like image macros became more hostile expressing racist, sexist and homophobic ideas. Eventually, the use of internet memes was used to express the turmoil and heated debates of the twenty-first century and ended up having more of an impact than merely being humorous photos on the internet (Shifman, 2014).

1.11 - Memes and Politics

In the 21st century, digital communications and participatory media culture have assumed a significant role in shaping various facets of modern life. Furthermore, the utilization of internet memes has emerged as a crucial means for users to actively engage in the public sphere online (Shifman, 2014). Along with advancements in technology and digital communication, multimillion-dollar corporations and the mainstream media are no longer the main producers of media entertainment and news reporting (Van Dijk, 2009). Nowadays, any regular person with a smartphone and an internet connection can participate and contribute to the media environment, through internet activities, and potentially reach a worldwide audience. In today's era, where "going viral" is seen as a measure of value, anonymous users can create content with unknown sources which can then be widely viewed and shared by other online users throughout the world (Jenkins, et al., 2013).

Often when researchers examine the relationship between the public's media consumption and their political views, they tend to overlook internet memes as they are not viewed as important or meaningful content. However, memes are characterised as user-generated online content that combines humour and visuals, circulated to a wide audience through online sources. Additionally, internet memes are described "as artifacts of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) and "multimodal artifacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary.... Image memes, in their very form, house potential for populist expression and conversation," (Milner, 2013, p. 2357). These definitions not only emphasize the important participatory environment of internet memes, but also how intertextuality and awareness is fundamental for the formation and understanding of memes. As user-generated digital content, memes can have real-world effects on those who consume them. Even though, internet memes are often harmless, light-hearted content created by anonymous real-world people, some types of internet memes can feature political elements that can influence people's views and behaviours towards important issues (Shifman, 2014). People's feelings are an important factor when engaging with information, especially if that information is political in any way, as their feelings can influence what kind of information they pay attention to, how they process that information and eventually shaping how they see the world and influencing political activities (Wyer, 2004). Therefore, internet memes or more so their creators, regularly

ridicule, or advocate political issues and actors through humour and parody (Shifman, 2014). The widespread use of memes has facilitated the global discussion and dissemination of political issues. Despite the fact that pop culture is typically associated with entertainment people employ popular culture to discuss politics. Memes foster online cultures of emancipation and debate by promoting awareness and freedom of expression that occur outside the regulation of mainstream media. Memes allow people to engage in debates and generate political statements in the online public sphere. This confirms the effectiveness of using popular, visual, and viral content to engage users about political issues. Memes have had an impact not only on engaging users but also on political communication, including the presentation and distribution of news (Bebić & Volarevic, 2018). Previous studies have discussed how memes have played a performative role in online political participation and activism (Frazer & Carlson, 2017). Memes encourage people to “play with the news” and reinterpret it in a way that makes sense to them (Tay, 2015). Additionally, studies suggest that meme-making is a meaning-making process that can intervene in mainstream political discourse and contribute to the production of new political ideas (Han, 2019). Internet memes, like verbal political jokes, are a way for people to reflect on and criticize politics. They can sometimes even become a form of political activism.

Mememes are particularly effective in political communication because they offer an alternative perspective on politics. Mememes can create communities of people with similar views, provide temporary relief from serious issues, and draw attention to important political issues (Laineste, et al., 2022). Mememes are well-suited for political commentary and criticism due to their humorous nature, which has historically been used to ridicule those in power. Despite being typically humorous, mememes can also be used as a tool to influence public opinion and have become one of the most influential media for spreading information (Miltner, 2017). Politicians who are often perceived as old-fashioned, uncool and considered out of touch with internet culture, become objects of mockery through mememes. Governments, being one of the most scrutinized and talked about entities, have not escaped the critical eye of meme communities and often become sources of mockery through mememes. Mememes have become a popular way for people to express their dissatisfaction with government decisions and to hold politicians accountable for their actions.

When a politician makes a controversial decision or statement, memes can quickly spring up that satirize or criticize that decision (Takovski, 2019). Younger generations are adopting non-traditional political methods that exist outside of the dominant public sphere. Social media's participatory nature allows individuals to engage with political issues on a personal level through storytelling and community solidarity (Sengupta, 2015). Slacktivism, a term used for online activities such as sharing content, liking posts, signing petitions, and commenting on social media platforms. It allows users to engage in political conversation and content with others who share their interests. Creating, sharing, and disseminating memes are important expressions of civic engagement and active citizenship. Research on memetic content has highlighted the potential impact of Internet memes on public discourse and commentary, as they allow citizens to express political dissent by challenging the influence of the mass media and political figures through peer-to-peer sharing and community participation (Shifman, 2014). This has been exemplified in China where meme culture has provided citizens with a platform for public conversation and community building in response to strict Internet censorship (Mina, 2014). In Western democracies, memes have also been shown to serve as alternative forms of discourse to the mainstream media during political events, enabling internet users to respond in real-time. Overall, Internet memes have the potential to facilitate and amplify the public voice, especially in media environments where free expression is restricted (Heiskanen, 2017). Of course, not all memes are created equal when it comes to political criticism. Some memes may simply be humorous or entertaining without having any real political content. Others may be offensive or insensitive, which can backfire and harm the credibility of the message being conveyed. It's important to be thoughtful and intentional when using memes as a tool for political criticism, and to consider the potential impact of the message being conveyed. Additionally, memes can often be misleading or taken out of context, leading to the spread of false information or conspiracy theories. This can be particularly damaging in the era of "fake news," where political discourse is increasingly polarized and mistrustful (Gal, et al., 2016).

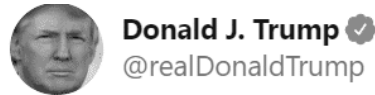
1.12 - Memes, Participatory Culture and Political Acts

For many years, researchers have done countless studies to find out how the media content influences people, especially in political contexts. However, it is important to mention that traditional mainstream media formats can differ from online user-generated content in and how it can influence the views and behaviours of viewers. Recent studies on online memes have shown that netizens, (meaning “citizen of the net”, used to describes someone who is actively involved in internet culture and online communities) use online memes to participate in public conversations about political events going on in the world (Milner, 2013).



Figure 8 - 2020 US Presidential memes included references to pop culture.

For example, after polling day for the 2020 US presidential elections, internet users started to share memes to express their anxieties while waiting for the ballots to be counted (Rosenblatt, 2020). Thousands of memes mentioning the election and featuring other elements of popular culture were shared all over social media as people waited for presidential election results (Figure 12). Around the same time, users began sharing other types to distract themselves from the US election. On November 5th, 2020 while Donald Trump was in the lead in a number of swing states he tweeted “STOP THE COUNT!” in a last-ditch effort to falsely claim that votes arriving or counted after polling day are illegal (Figure 13) (Lin, 2020).



STOP THE COUNT!

7:42 PM · Nov 5, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

113.2K Retweets **292.1K** Quote Tweets **683.6K** Likes

Figure 9 - Donald Trump, Stop the count tweet

In response, internet users started to share images of Count von Count from the popular children’s television show, Sesame Street. Count von Count, a Muppet style vampire, simply known as “The Count” who has appeared on the PBS television show since 1972, started appearing in memes all over the internet exclaiming “YOU CAN’T STOP THE COUNT!” (Figure 14) (Lin, 2020).



Figure 10 - Sesame Street “Stop the count” Memes.

Furthermore, digital communication has brought about an “explosion of grassroots participation,” (Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2014, p. 613). Internet memes embody virtual communication of a user’s political beliefs, attitudes and preferences and are now seen as new means of political participation. Additionally, memes are now a popular form of online activism, performing as natural methods by which people can react almost instantaneously to current political events without worrying about being censored or experiencing delays caused by traditional media outlets (Ross & Rivers, 2017). The capability of memes to circumvent gatekeepers of conventional media makes them a

suitable tool for societies with both democratic and anti-democratic leanings. This is particularly relevant since the absence of a clear origin of memes fosters and motivates anonymous participation (Vickery, 2014). Many studies show that online participation leads to further political engagement online and sometimes offline through protests (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). However, some compare online participation to clicktivism or slacktivism with no social or political impact (Morozov, 2009) and that the act of sharing political memes is “impulsive and disposable political gesture” (Halupka, 2014, p. 129). However, since the 2016 American election, the rise of Trump and Brexit, political memes have become the main source of online participatory behaviour and brought about a new type of citizen empowerment (Kinane, 2021). Citizen empowerment is made possible by ease of access to digital technologies, their relative low cost and how fast memetic slogans can spread through the coordinated actions of online users. Digital media allows users to take on the role of gatekeeper, and the content they create, and share is an easy way to participate in a conversation that is often controlled by the mainstream media organisations. This online activism (such as meme sharing) often appears in union with offline political activism such as protests, demonstrations, and other types of political activism (Milner, 2016).

1.13 – Memes as political discourse and expression

In conjunction with studies on memes as political artifacts, a number of studies have also defined memes as an important element of political discourse (Milner, 2013). Theories on visual communication explain that visual texts can be used to communicate complex arguments (Helmets & Hill, 2004) and as internet memes are visual and intertextual, they can reference multiple texts, events and ideas (D'Angelo, 2009). Like other forms of visual political communication, such as cartoons and political satire, online memes contain visual arguments that can influence viewers opinions and behaviours in other methods of political participation. Discourses of online memes often blend popular culture with politics and are consumed as entertainment. Early studies on political entertainment and satire have shown how political media such as comics, television and cartoons can influence a person's knowledge, views and attitudes towards certain political issues, figures, and institutions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Additionally, netzines use memes to critique and ridicule the statements and behaviours the of political actors and institutions. Memes deliver a corresponding discourse to the traditional narrative delivered by the mainstream media (Heiskanen, 2017). Furthermore, Milner describes memes as a populist way to engage with public discourse (Milner, 2013) and as polyvocal public conversation, which increases discourse by opening new channels for civil engagement. Other studies argue that anonymity (associated with the circulation of and engagement with online media) may encourage political engagement and shields negative discourse for controversial or unpopular opinions (Milner, 2013). Furthermore, memes are not usually subjected to the same amount of fact-checking as traditional forms of media and benefit from the internet's difficulty in distinguishing jokes from slander. Additionally, as memes utilize parody and humour within their texts, these humorous characteristics help diminish offensive or controversial opinions. Political memes were a popular method of expression during the 2016 US presidential election. As both Trump and Clinton were viewed as unfavourable candidates, many memes were created to call out their problematic behaviours, policies and statements (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Most internet memes come off as light-hearted, comical content and have in recent years brought about positive social implications such as people power and youth political participation (Seiffert-Brockmann, et al., 2018). However, there is a darker side to internet memes that depict hateful and sadistic views, often targeting minority groups such as people of colour, members of the LGBTQ+

community and women. These types of memes disguise themselves as humour, however they can infiltrate multiple online spaces, where users share these “jokes” normalising malicious behaviours and ideologies (Briggs & Burke, 2010). There are two major groups responsible for creating and spreading malicious memes internet trolls and the alt right.

1.14 - Internet Trolling

Not to be confused with the fictional species from fairy tales and fantasy, the modern ‘troll’ is one of the most famous cultural and political figures in the digital sphere. Trolling culture has become fundamental to contemporary political activities, circulating through the mainstream and one of the most active forms of political participation and activism in recent years (Merrin, 2018). The act of trolling has achieved notoriety over the last decade as a result of increasing mainstream media coverage of trolling activities. Trolls target online users in multiple online spaces, including social media sites and online communities. The term “internet trolling” is broadly used to describe a form of harassment or malicious behaviour online. Recognized as anti-social online behaviour, trolling is described as the act of enticing other online users into meaningless discourse where the troll purposely attempts to build conflict with other users through inflammatory and menacing forms of communication (Coles & West, 2016). Trolling is the malicious intent to upset and aggravate users in order to cause harm and distress. Trolling is used synonymously with cyberbullying and activities include harassment, inflammatory conversations, sharing distressful memes and imagery and vandalizing community groups and pages (March & Marrington, 2019). Memes are a fundamental part of troll culture, trolls use memes and pop-culture references in their trolling, reusing cultural objects for their purposes. In recent years, memes have become mainstream and are now a common part of everyday online interactions (Phillips, 2015). While memes are considered as a source of humour, they were originally a popular tool for trolls to cause havoc and are still used by trolls to this day. Memes can carry misinformation and be taken seriously by people, even ending up as proof in political discussions (Mocanua, 2015). Memes can “express not only political identities but also larger cultural values within networked popular culture” (Burroughs, 2013, p. 257). Troll culture follows the belief of “lulz”, a subversion of the word "lol", meaning to Laugh Out Loud, “lulz” is used as a synonym for Schadenfreude which means is the experience of pleasure, or in the case the “lulz” from an other's suffering. Reason why trolls do what they do is because they are in it for the “lulz”. In trolling culture, “lulz” is taken seriously where they make sure they engage their audience and ensure that they pay attention (Phillips, 2015). While most trolls say they are only in it for the lulz, trolling is often directed at political issues. Trolls believe that nothing should be taken seriously, and they take an oppositional position against

sentimentality and ideologies. Trolls mainly provoke and as a general rule, they don't take principled stands on issues, but their trolling often ends up making a political statement, even when it is not intended (Phillips, 2015). Additionally, a study from Mocanu et al. (2015) shows that trolls often engage in creating "caricatural versions" of news that are distributed by alternative media channels. The type of news troll's post often contains a form of parody and contain false information. However, this type of communication spreads widely and affects the formation of opinions among people who tend to trust unproven sources (Mocanua, 2015). Most forms of trolling contain some type of commentary and while trolls claim that it's only for the lulz, they are also concerned about political issues that can affect their freedom to troll (Phillips, 2015).

A 2014 online poll reported that over one-third of American aged between 18 – 34 years participated in online trolling activities, with topics such as religion, politics and current events sparking trolling behaviour (Gammon, 2014). Over the years, many scholars have conducted research to understand why online users participate in trolling activities and some have agreed that the protection of anonymity attracted users to the trolling culture. Trolls are found everywhere online; however, they are able to hide their real identities by using online usernames and avatars instead of their real names and photos of themselves. Trolls are unknown unless they accidentally reveal their identity or are caught and arrested for their malicious behaviours (Synnott, 2017). Online anonymity has caused problems for researchers who aim to better understand the phenomenon. In her 2013 study on trolling behaviour on the internet messaging board 4chan, Phillips acknowledged that it can be difficult to identify a troll's specific demographics, such as age or gender, as they do not share any information that can lead to identifying them. 4chan is an anonymous online image board which is infamous for trolling activities. She observed that some key demographics can be identified by examining the language used when engaging in conversations on the website. Philips explained that some of the most engaging topics included discussions about American culture and politics. Additionally, Phillips concluded that 4chan users mainly identified as middle-class suburban Americans (Phillips, 2013). When it comes to gender, online trolling is male dominated activity. Trolls express sexist ideologies and language toward women, emphasizing masculinity among the community (Phillips, 2015). Research has also shown that men are more likely to be involved in negative online behaviours and they rank higher in global internet use and online antisocial behaviour (Buckels, et al., 2014). According to

Milner (2016), online social spaces have historically been more masculine and to participate in them one is required to perform masculinity, in order to strengthen the masculine ideology (Milner, 2016). Additionally, female trolls and those who impersonate women, engage in similar use of language as male trolls. Therefore, the majority of studies on online troll activities, agree that trolling is male dominated activity (Phillips, 2015). Internet trolls are also mostly considered to be white, as evident from the behaviours they exhibit as majority of the humour by trolls is aimed at people of colour and there is a general assumption of whiteness among members of online communities such as 4chan (Phillips, 2013). Online trolling spaces are often white, masculine and heteronormative environments and are often hostile towards ideas of diversity or anything else that goes against their status quo (Higgin, 2013). However, illustrating online trolls as predominately white should only be considered in context of the western countries as trolling is shown to also be present in other parts of the world (de Seta, 2013).

1.15 - The Alt-Right

Trolling, an activity associated with the growth of the Alt-right in online spaces, has been prevalent since the early phases of the internet. However, it gained significant momentum, in recent years. The Alternative Right or the abbreviated Alt-Right is a radical social movement and phenomenon that has become infamous in recent years after the 2016 United States Presidential Election (Miller & Graves, 2020). The Alt-Right is described as a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that “white identity” is under attack by multicultural forces using “political correctness” and “social justice” to undermine white people and “their” civilization’ (Miller & Graves, 2020). The movement is predominantly online and is famous for its use of online memes, trolling, support of Donald Trump, white nationalism, fascism and white identitarianism (Hankes & Amend, 2018). The term ‘Alt-Right’, was created in 2008 by Richard Spencer, a Trump supporter who is known for his neo-Nazi, antisemitic and white supremacist ideologies. Spencer worked with multiple American conservative media outlets and heads the white nationalist think tank National Policy Institute. Spencer launched the Alt-Right movement in 2010 with the establishment of the Alternative Right blog, where he worked to develop the movement’s ideological beliefs (Hankes & Amend, 2018). The Alt-Right is used as a vague term to conceal its racist white nationalist, supremacist and fascist ideologies, and makes it appear unique from the traditional far-right. However, what is remarkably important about the Alt-Right is its power to appear new and radical, and attractive to today’s radicalised youth culture. Additionally, what makes the Alt-Right different from previous far-right movements, is that the movement mainly operates on social media (Hawley, 2017).

The Alt-Right is, entirely leaderless. The people involved in contributing to and or consuming the content are on different Alt-Right sites and online forums such as Twitter, Reddit and 4chan. The overall populace of the Alt-Right is composed of anonymous youths who were introduced to the movement’s ideas through online message boards and discussion websites such as 4chan and Internet platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Reddit (Winter, 2019). The Alt-Right community is made up of racialsists, 4channers (4chan users), neo-Nazis, conspiracy theorists, meninists (Men who believe they are victimized by feminism), and Men’s Rights Activists. Some users are introduced to the Alt-Right movement through a community sub-thread on Reddit known as “The Red Pill” (Winter, 2019). The Red Pill mainly

consists of men and was established on the belief that women have it better than men. 'Red Pilling' or being red pillled, a term derived from a scene in the film *The Matrix* (1999) where taking a red pill allows one to see reality. In this context, it refers to the liberation of men from a life of delusion, particularly feminist delusion (Ging, 2017). Those who "take the red pill" maintain that it's men not women, who have been socially marginalized. Feminism is considered a damaging ideology and "Red Pillers" are quick to cite examples that strengthen their points, some going so far as to argue that society is entirely anti-male (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). Additionally, Dignam and Rohlinger (2019) state, "among other complaints, the alt-right laments men's status in Western society, arguing that men are under attack from leftism, political correctness, and feminism" (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 589). Alt-right activism aims to restore patriarchal constructs in order to hold power over those seen as inferior. Members that are often seen as inferior to the alt-right activists include women, LGBTQ+ members and people of colour (Winter, 2019). While the Alt-Right movement has been around since 2010, its reputation and familiarity grew quickly since 2016 because of Donald Trump's presidential election campaign and accelerated the alt-right movement from the dark side of online spaces into mainstream culture (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). Donald Trump became an icon for the alt-right as he made cruel remarks about Muslims, immigrants, liberals and people with disabilities, as well as making misogynistic comments and proudly projecting the idea of white American nationalism. He also supported white grievance politics, which attracted a lot of white male voters, who believed that they themselves are victims of racial and feminist discrimination (Pearce, 2020). Additionally, Trump was active on Twitter during his election campaign and his time in office. Some of Trump's followers included members of the alt-right movement and he would often retweet tweets from accounts of white nationalists. However, when Trump was confronted about his support of the far-right he would declare ignorance or shifted the blame to members of left wing political parties (Pearce, 2020). On August 12th, 2017, the Alt-Right organised a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Numerous far-right groups attended, including members of the alt-right, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, KKK, and numerous right-wing militias. The aim of the rally was to unify the American white nationalist movement and oppose the removal of a local Confederate monument following the Charleston church shooting in 2015, where a white supremacist shot and killed nine black church members (Winter,

2019). The rally turned violent after protesters clashed with counter-protesters, resulting in multiple people being injured and one death after one far-right supporter drove his car into a group of counter-protestors. After the rally, Trump made a statement to the media saying that he condemned “hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides” and later saying that there were “very fine people on both sides”. Trump’s statements about the rally generated negative responses both online and in the mainstream media as Trump did not attempt to denounce white supremacists and his remarks were seen as sympathetic towards members of the far-right (Jacobs & Murray, 2017). The convergence of a politically charged atmosphere and a vast population of active internet users created the perfect storm for the flourishing of Alt-right online media activities, fostering the development of dynamic political meme cultures.

1.16 - Pepe the Frog

Internet trolls and the alt-right both use internet memes to illustrate and spread their ideologies on social media and in online messaging boards like 4chan and Reddit. An example of one meme that is used across both groups is Pepe the Frog.



Figure 11 - Pepe the Frog

Pepe the frog is a green anthropomorphic frog with a humanoid body and was originally created by artist Matt Furie for his 2005 comic series, *Boy's Club*. Furie's comics regularly featured characters playing video games, getting stoned and discussing their toilet habits. Furie shared pages of his comics onto websites such as MySpace and Tumblr (Know Your Meme, 2020). In one strip, Pepe is seen urinating with his pants pulled down to his ankles. In the last panel of the comic, Pepe is asked why he pulls down his pants to his ankles and he casually explains it "feels good man". Later, Pepe became a hit on 4chan's /b/ board (one of the most popular boards of 4chan which permits discussion and posting of any sort of content), where Pepe memes and variants of the frog were created and redistributed. 4chan users, adapted Pepe's face and catchphrase to fit different scenarios and emotions and new renditions of Pepe started appearing, including as sad, angry, and surprised Pepe variants (Know Your Meme, 2020). Pepe's simple and distinctive features made it easy for users to draw their own renditions of the character, and his popularity boomed. Versatility helped the meme spread from 4chan across multiple social media platforms and eventually Pepe was adopted into mainstream Internet culture. By 2014, the frog was so well-known that even celebrities such as Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj were posting Pepe the frog memes (Frank, 2016). When Pepe started to become mainstream, he was no longer unique to

4chan's community. Annoyed that outsiders had appropriated their in-joke, 4chan trolls attempted to reclaim the meme through a smear campaign, aiming to defame the otherwise innocent meme (Anderson & Matthias, 2018). New memes started to surface which illustrated the frog in a malicious light, where Pepe was seen along with racist and Nazi iconography. In order to increase their reach, racist and neo-Nazi Pepe memes started to appear more popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The purpose was to use the Pepe meme and cause maximum offence, because if 4chan couldn't enjoy Pepe the frog memes, neither could anyone else (Anderson & Matthias, 2018). Whilst 4chan turning their adored frog into a Nazi icon might seem irrational, author of *Kill All Normies* (2017), Angela Nagle notes that the use of swastikas or Nazi flirtations as part of a performance certainly has precedent (Nagle, 2017, p. 34). She explains that musicians such as the band Joy Division, who named themselves after the *Freudenabteilung* (Nazi brothels), or Siouxsie Sioux who wore a swastika armband, that Nazi iconography is often used as a "two fingers to the establishment". She argues that these acts of transgression serve as little more than shock factor, designed to offend and antagonise the mainstream. Seemingly, 4chan's support for the fascist frog was "ironic" and was brought on by the media's increased negative interpretation of the meme. The hypocrisy of their support is questionable, as despite this "ironic" defiling of the frog, many 4chan users seemed happy with his new connotations (Nagle, 2017).



Figure 12 – Pepe the frog used in troll memes

In 2016, Pepe's racist connotations were so known that the meme became symbol of the alt-right, images of the frog began appearing at alt-right rallies and Donald Trump election rallies. The alt-right's adoption of Pepe symbol ultimately saw the character

become politically charged and soon marked as a “hate symbol” (Frank, 2016). During the 2016 United States presidential election, oblivious to the implications of the meme, Donald Trump retweeted an image of a Pepe representation of himself. Later during the election, Donald Trump Jr. posted a parody movie poster on Instagram titled “The Deplorables,” a play on Hillary Clinton’s controversial phrase “basket of deplorables,” which featured Pepe’s face among those of members of the Trump family and other figures from the alt-right movement (Frank, 2016).



Figure 13 – Pepe the frog imagery at an alt-right rally

In September 2016, a post published on Hillary Clinton’s campaign website described Pepe as “a symbol associated with white supremacy” and denounced Trump’s campaign for its supposed promotion of the meme (Sanders, 2017). Throughout the election, Trump supporters across social media created and shared a storm of Pepe memes. These memes portrayed Trump as a version of Pepe with the same features of the amphibian, but with Trump’s iconic blonde hairdo. The Trump Pepe memes illustrated the character giving speeches at podiums, holding firearms and illustrating Trump’s racist ideologies such as his promise to “build a great wall” in order to limit Mexican immigration (Anderson & Matthias, 2018). Nagle describes 2016 as “the year the media mainstream’s hold over formal politics died.” (Nagle, 2017, p. 9). As the surge of political memes, in particular Trump Pepe memes, overshadowed traditional media sources. Whilst these images seem like nothing more than a comical political

commentary, the frequent mentions of Trump's name helped elevate his social media campaign and possibly helped him win his place as the 45th President of the United States (Miller & Graves, 2020). Due to the influential effect of Pepe the Frog and Trump memes during the 2016 US presidential elections, it is evident that internet memes have firmly established their place in political discourse, exerting a significant impact capable of shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes.

1.17 - The Simpsons

Ireland Simpsons Fans (ISF) is an online community dedicated to sharing memes based on scenes from the popular US animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (1989). Therefore, it is important to understand the history and cultural significance of the hit television series. *The Simpsons* (1989) is an American animated television series starring the Simpson family based in a fictional town known as Springfield. The Simpson family consists of Father Homer, Mother Marge, eldest child Bart, middle child Lisa, and the youngest Maggie, as they go about their daily lives along with many recurring and secondary characters who reside in the town of Springfield. The series is a satirical portrayal of the American family and frequently parodies American culture, pop culture, television and society (Turner, 2004). *The Simpsons* is one of the most successful television shows in history and has been described as a "media revolution" (Rushkoff, 2004, p. 292) and "a pop-cultural institution" (Fink, 2021, p. 15)



Figure 14 - The Simpson Family

Since its debut in 1989, 34 seasons and over 740 episodes (IMDB, 2023) of *The Simpsons* has been broadcast in more than 200 countries, with the series being dubbed in over 15 languages and subtitled into 27 different languages. It is the longest-running animated television series, longest-running sitcom, and the longest-running scripted prime time television series in American history. The series sparked the prime-time cartoon boom of the 1990s, paving the way for subsequent animated shows like *Futurama* (1999), *South Park* (1997), and *Family Guy* (1999) (Ortved, 2009). With millions of dollars in merchandise and characters appearing in multiple forms of media including video games, comic books and a feature-length film titled *The Simpsons*

Movie released worldwide in July 2007. *The Simpsons* is even more than a cartoon it is a brand, a world, and a staple of American pop culture (Gray, 2006).

The Simpsons was created by American comic artist Matt Groening in 1987 as a cartoon short for a variety program known as the *Tracey Ullman Show* (1987-1990) broadcasted on the Fox Broadcasting Company. These short cartoons ridiculed the ideals of suburban American family life and starred the Simpsons, a yellow-skinned, bug-eyed dysfunctional nuclear family. *The Simpsons'* shorts were a recurring segment on the *Tracey Ullman Show* for three seasons before the series was developed into a half hour prime time show on the Fox Network (Turner, 2004). The first episode of *The Simpsons* aired on December 17, 1989, with a Christmas episode titled "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire", with the series airing regularly in January 1990. While the Simpsons was slow to gain an audience, its popularity slowly grew throughout the year and later established the Fox Network as a major competitor in broadcast television and leading to a resurgence of prime-time animated television not seen since the release of the *Flintstones* in the 1960s. With its popularity rising, *The Simpsons* became a pop culture institution of the 1990s (Fink, 2019). What attracted fans to *The Simpsons* was its ability to "get away with it" while being one of the biggest television shows on air. Instead of being a cult comedy only appealing to a small number of viewers, *The Simpsons* became a large part of mainstream popular culture, embracing transgressive ideas and representing social issues such as politics, strikes and working class issues not often seen on public television at the time (Alberti, 2004). Before the release of *The Simpsons*, television sitcoms were packed with unrealistic portrayals of family life, where the families featured were predominantly white, wealthy and frequently preached the importance of traditional gender roles (Moore, 1992). Television in the 1980s displayed a distinctly conservative perspective, in keeping with the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan at the time. A common theme in television shows during the Reagan era was a yearning for the nostalgia of the past, a simpler, more innocent time (Henry, 2012). Sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), *Family Ties* (1982–89), *Golden Girls* (1985–92), and *Who's the Boss?* (1984–92) helped spread Reaganism's sanitised vision of the American dream (Fink, 2021). These shows primarily presented images of nuclear families led by a friendly father figure who is portrayed as all knowing, always right, and far superior to his wife and children; this structure served to reinforce the prevailing stereotypes of the era. Furthermore, the

political issues polarising communities and families at the time were almost entirely absent from the shows' storylines (Henry, 2012).

The Simpsons reflected the everyday lives of working-class people by depicting and satirising their lived experiences of work, home and school. *The Simpsons* is focused on the traditional nuclear family with Homer, the working-class patriarch, Marge, the housewife, Lisa, the bright genius daughter, and Bart the rebellious son (Sharzer, 2017). Each episode of *The Simpsons*, utilised the stylistic conventions of television formats well-known to television viewers, including a self-contained plot that is concluded within each half-hour episode, a conventional suburban location, and the idealised nuclear family. The Simpson family is more in sync with the reality of modern life, far different from the media-constructed standard presented by sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*. *The Simpsons* disrupted the small-mindedness of typical family comedies by addressing relevant social issues. Additionally, *The Simpsons* exposed the superficiality of the "happy family" stereotype by showing how fabricated conflict-free relationships are, challenging the patriarchal authority of the father, and subverting narrative conventions like the "moral lesson" and the "happy ending" by the use of cliff hangers. In summary, where many situation comedies tend to reinforce prevailing values and societal conventions, *The Simpsons* consistently challenges them (Henry, 2012). Parody and satire are at the heart of *The Simpsons* universe. The show is a parody of the American family sitcoms and is a satire of American contemporary society. Parody is an imitation of a cultural text usually an exaggerated imitation for comedy's sake and satire is a form of humour that uses exaggeration and ridicule to mock the flaws of institutions, individuals or entire communities (Baldick, 2001, p. 228). *The Simpsons* often parodies popular television and movies throughout the show. Parody is typically less harsh than satire, but both can be humorous. Although while satire is more critical, it works in tandem with parody. Parodying the conventions of the family sitcom is one method *The Simpsons* employs to comment on contemporary culture (Gray, 2006).



Figure 15 - *The Simpsons* parodying *James Bond* and *Clockwork Orange*.

The Simpsons uses its characters to reflect common societal failings through a satirical lens. These techniques use the audience's knowledge with popular culture and public life to make critiques of society and those in authority (Gray, 2006). For example, Mr Burns local nuclear power plant owner, is a stereotype of corporate America. He is the most powerful and richest citizen of Springfield, he is cheap (pays three dollars a year in tax), corrupt and a tyrannical boss who has no care for his employee's safety.

Throughout the show Mr Burns is often portrayed as the big evil bad guy of Springfield with his trademark expression "Excellent...", said in a sinister tone while steeping his fingertips, often followed by a maniacal laugh. Additionally, the show uses parody to illustrate My Burns evil nature – for example the song "The Imperial March" otherwise known as "Darth Vader's theme" composed by John Williams for the film 1980 Star Wars film *The Empire Strikes Back* has been played twice in the background of a scene featuring Mr. Burns, in "Marge Gets a Job" (Episode 7 season 8, 1992) and "A Star is Burns" (Episode 18, season 6 1995). In "Treehouse of Horror IV" (Episode 5, Season 5) Mr Burns is portrayed a Bram Stoker's Dracula and in "Marge vs. the Monorail" (Episode 12, season 4) Mr. Burns arrives at a court room as he is restrained in the same way as Hannibal Lecter in the 1991 horror film *The Silence of the Lambs*. However, the show has been accused of being a threat to family values, a concept that has gained considerable societal traction during the height of *The Simpsons* popularity. These criticisms were mostly aimed at *The Simpsons* predominant protagonists Homer and Bart (Henry, 2012).



Figure 16 – Bart Merchandise.

Depicted as a skateboard-riding, slingshot holding, class clown, Bart Simpson was seen as the star of early *The Simpsons* episodes. He rejected authority, revolted against the establishment, often talking back to those in power and frequently annoying his father Homer and school principal and making frequent prank calls to the local bar Moe's Tavern. The ten-year old rascal was the definition of punkism and pranksterism which resonated well with the 1990s youth culture. T-shirts with his famous catchphrases - "Eat my shorts," "Don't have a cow, man," and "Ay, caramba!" were prevalent among youth fashion. This caused controversy in the 90s, where many schools across America criticised the show, stating Bart Simpson was a bad role model for kids. Some states, like Ohio and California, even went as far as to banning students from wearing T-shirt's that featured Bart's images or catchphrases (Fink, 2021). Bart, served as the voice for the show's writers not only toying with the culture of Springfield but also commenting on aspects of society outside the show (Rushkoff, 2004). During the 1992 American presidential election campaigns the then President George H. W. Bush was giving a speech at the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters. During his speech Bush stated that the nation needed to be "a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons." Bush's metaphor mentioned the 1970s TV show *The Waltons*, which was a romantic depiction of Virginian family life during the Great Depression. He contrasted *The Waltons'* happy family life to *The Simpsons'* chaotic home life (Fink, 2021). *The Simpsons* creators responded days later with an alternate opening of a rerun

episode of Season 3's "Stark Raving Dad". In the added scene, we see the Simpson family eating dinner and watching Bush's speech on the TV. Bart and Lisa are lying on the floor, Marge is serving Homer and her sisters sitting on the couch. After Bush's statement comparing the Walton's and the Simpsons, Bart turns to the couch, from the audience point of view we see the back of the heads his father and aunts as if Bart is breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience watching and says, "Hey, we're just like the Waltons. We're praying for an end to the depression, too!" (Brooks, 2004).

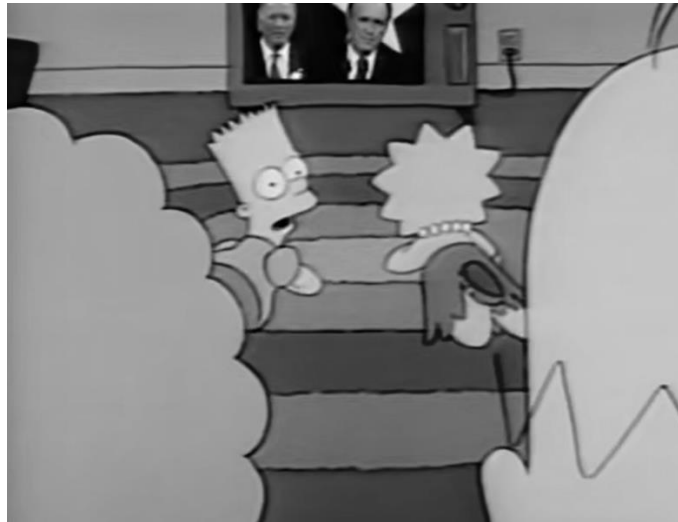


Figure 17 - Bart speaking to the audience in "Stark Raving Dad"

Four years later, "George H. W. Bush" (voiced by Simpsons veteran Harry Sherrar), appears as a character on the show and moves across the street from the Simpsons in a season seven episode titled "Two Bad Neighbors". Bush is portrayed as a crotchety neighbour who feuds with Homer after the former President spanks Bart for his bad behaviour and disrespecting his elders. Bart informs Homer - "I begged him to stop, but he said it was for the good of the nation!". Violence ensues between the two neighbours and by the end of the episode, Bush moves out of Springfield, symbolically leaving his differences with The Simpsons unresolved. Bart's cheeky comeback to Bush's comment and Bush's caricature appearance in the series was a criticism of the Bush administration and their economic policies. Bush was blind to the fact that these idealized depictions of the family and community were merely media-constructed realities (White & Holman, 2011).

At the head of a traditional family sitcom is the father who is warm, approachable, a hard worker, and a model citizen. He provides for his family and acts as a moral

authority. Homer Simpson, however, contradicts this stereotype by being the anti-dad and a satire of the working-class man, overweight, shellfish, economically unsuccessful, poor parenting skills and is very stupid, effectively, Homer is Springfield's equivalent of the village idiot (Perlmutter, 2014). Additionally, Homer is the caricature of late capitalist consumer society, he constantly sits in front of the TV, drinks too much and stuffs his face with donuts. Television distracts him from his family, he buys what advertisements tell him to. When he is not on the couch drinking beer he is drinking at the local bar, Moe's Tavern (Fink, 2019). Despite being a safety technician at a nuclear power plant, Homer has no work ethic, sleeps on the job and pretends to do work when the boss catches him. As opposed to the hardworking ethic of most sitcom fathers—the ethic that powers the American dream, Homer is often celebrated by the town for his bad qualities, and just as the spirit of the community radiates from the father in most TV sitcoms Homer is a representation of Springfield's culture and community (Sharzer, 2017). In episode 23, season 8 titled "Homer's Enemy," Homer tries to befriend a new co-worker named Frank Grimes, who is a hardworking but a lonely man. We learn that Grimes has struggled for everything he has in life, which has largely left him a bitter person. Frank is frustrated and enraged by Homer, who is lazy and irresponsible but nevertheless maintains his status as a respectable member of society. Homer's perfect family, perfect home and popularity at work are all things Grimes wishes for but has not accomplished despite his hard work ethic (Sharzer, 2017). The show's writers have indicated that Frank Grimes represents a real-world critic who visits Springfield and asserts that Homer corrupts the American Dream and traditional values. Homer's ineptitude and slacker attitude give the impression that his privileged life can only exist in the cartoon realm and not to be compared to real life. However, in the episode Grimes doesn't know that this is all part of a TV show and that Homer's character is used for the purpose of satire. Grimes comments - "You're what's wrong with America, Simpson," and "You coast through life, you do as little as possible, and you leech off of decent, hardworking people like me!" echo the comments of real life critics of the show and that the American dream is just a fantasy pushed by mainstream media (Fink, 2021). As evident above, politics are critiqued frequently with the show. While cartoons are often believed to have little social value because they are seen as merely children's shows, *The Simpsons* writers show that cartoons can be a form of political participation and engagement (White & Holman, 2011). *The Simpsons*, like other form of media is not

politically neutral, despite the show’s creator Matt Groening, claiming that *The Simpsons* does not have a particular axe to grind and the show writers saying the show “promotes no point of view on any issue” (Kiedrowski, 2013, p. 198) While others claim that *The Simpsons* does not take sides asserting that the show satirizes Republicans and Democrats equally (Cantor, 1999). Despite arguments, there have been plenty of evidence that the show leans left and often criticizes right wing politics. There have been numerous occasions throughout the show in which The Simpsons mocked its parent channel the Fox Network. Fox is an extension of Fox News Corporation, headed by Rupert Murdoch, who is best known as a supporter of the Republican Party and whose media empire has repeatedly expressed conservative views and often acts as a representative for the political right. Fox is the subject of several jokes on the show and Murdoch is occasionally portrayed as an evil tyrant – in a season seven episode titled “Sideshow Bob’s Last Gleaming”, a caricature of Murdoch appears in a prison yard, wearing an orange jumpsuit and scolding another inmate for criticising Fox (White & Holman, 2011). In a season fourteen episode titled “Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington.” There is a spoof of Fox News in the family’s TV set, satirizing the reporting style and political bias associated with Fox News, showing a rolling news ticker at the bottom of the screen reading: "Pointless news crawls up 37 per cent... Do Democrats cause cancer? Find out at foxnews.com... Rupert Murdoch: Terrific dancer... Dow down 5,000 points... Study: 92 per cent of Democrats are gay... JFK posthumously joins Republican Party... Oil slicks found to keep seals young, supple..." (Byrne, 2003).



Figure 18 – Satire of Fox News from the episode “Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington”

In a season eleven episode titled “Missionary: Impossible” Homer accidentally donates \$10,000 to a PBS telethon a rival network. At the end of the episode Fox is holding its own telethon with Murdoch there taking calls. Bart calls to make a pledge and Murdoch says ‘you’ve saved my network!’ Bart replies, ‘Wouldn’t be the first time.’ Bart’s quote references to when *The Simpsons* success helped to keep the Fox network from going bankrupt in the early 1990s. This scene is an obvious portrayal of the show's double-coded relationship to its environment, to society, and to the viewer. The dependence of the show with Fox as well as the dependence of Fox to the Simpsons is acknowledged in this episode. In conjunction with references found in other episodes, it admits that the spectator is aware that the link to Fox is negative, or at the least resentful (Tschiggerl, 2014). From the 1990s to the early 2000s people of all ages throughout the world have watched *The Simpsons* on a daily basis. *The Simpsons* has the power to define an entire generation (Turner, 2004). Research on political comedy TV has shown that information in the guise of comedy can contribute to the way young people view politics (Cao, 2010). *The Simpsons* uses satire to question society and those in power. The show’s use of satire goes much deeper than humour, it looks at a town full of corruption and to get the viewers to re-examine their world (Turner, 2004).

1.18 - The Simpsons Decline & Memes

The Simpsons has been a long-running animated sitcom, which was regarded as one of the best television shows during its Golden Age. However, its popularity has declined since then. While the show has had some strong episodes in recent seasons and being available to stream on *Disney+* after *Disney* purchased 21st Century Fox in 2019, it is often criticised for being disjointed, satirically blunt, and uninspired. Though the series has had some standout episodes in recent seasons, it is no longer as relevant as it was before, and the show's attempts at topical writing have led to reputational damage (Gunning, 2022). The decline in quality is subjective and may be due to stagnancy, a lack of ingenuity, and the emergence of similar shows that render it irrelevant (Laib, 2023). In his video essay titled “The Fall of The Simpsons” Irish Youtuber John Walsh, better known as *Super Eyepatch Wolf* outlines, some of the reasons for the show’s fall from grace. In the video he notes that *The Simpsons* went through changes as the show progressed, with the narratives becoming less poignant and the characters less consistent, and the jokes becoming more like those of an average sitcom. This shift can be attributed to two primary factors: the departure of the original creators and the loss of several key writers. As the show continued, more and more writers left, resulting in a decline in quality. The style of comedy also changed, with the humour becoming less layered and nuanced, and the characters, particularly Homer, becoming more one-dimensional. This shift could be felt in every resident of Springfield, with some characters being destroyed in the process. The show's characters became caricatures of their former selves, and the writing became lazy and unoriginal. The show's decline is symbolized by its transformation from a parody of celebrity culture to a celebration of it (Walsh, 2017). While *The Simpsons* was once renowned for its emotional depth and roundedness of character, many feel that it has now become a parody of itself, with memorable story arcs being sacrificed for the sake of cheap gags and one-liners (Laib, 2023). However, another writer argues against the belief that *The Simpsons* is no longer worth watching, stating that it is currently in an under-rated renaissance. While the show may not be as strong as it was during its first ten seasons, it has managed to find new ways to tell engaging stories with heart, originality, great voice work, and genuinely funny gags. While it has suffered some low ratings, it is still one of the most popular titles on *Disney+*, with many of the newer episodes ranking among the best ever. The show has changed with the times, and although not all episodes are winners, it is one of

the freshest animated shows on the market (Kitchener, 2022). Despite this, *The Simpsons* has experienced a resurgence in popularity online, with the show becoming a staple in meme culture and online communities. While the show has always had a strong following, the rise of the internet has allowed fans to connect with one another in new and exciting ways, sharing their love for the show and creating new forms of content based on their favourite characters and moments.



Figure 19 - Steamed Hams from the episode “22 Short Films About Springfield”

One of the most popular memes to emerge from *The Simpsons* is the "Steamed Hams" meme, which has become a cultural phenomenon in its own right (Fink, 2021). The meme originated from a scene in the show's seventh season. The term "Steamed Hams" originated from a segment in an episode of *The Simpsons* titled "22 Short Films About Springfield", which was first aired on April 14th, 1996. The episode features several short scenes about various citizens of Springfield, including a segment where Principal Skinner invites Superintendent Chalmers over for dinner, following the classic sitcom trope of dinner with the boss. However, things do not go as planned when Skinner burns the dinner and proceeds to cover up the mishap with a series of increasingly absurd lies, including jumping out of the kitchen window to buy hamburgers from a nearby Krusty Burger restaurant. To deceive Chalmers, Skinner claims that he is serving "steamed clams" for dinner and tries to convince him that the hamburgers he serves are called "steamed hams" in Albany, New York (Know Your Meme, 2017). The scene has become a fan favourite, and has been parodied and remixed countless times online, with fans creating new versions of the scene that feature everything from popular video games to political figures. The popularity of the "Steamed Hams" meme is just one example of

how *The Simpsons* has found new life online. Fans have also created countless other memes and fan works, from remixes of classic episodes to fan art and fanfiction. Online communities such as Reddit and Facebook have become hubs for Simpsons fans to connect and share their love for the show, with users creating dedicated subreddits and hashtags for everything from favourite quotes to fan theories (Fink, 2021). While *The Simpsons* is no longer the cultural force it once was, the enduring popularity of the “Steamed Hams” segment and its widespread use in internet culture serve as a reminder of the show’s influence on comedy and culture. The segment’s ability to evolve and grow beyond its original context is a testament to the creativity of its fans and the power of the internet to connect people and ideas. *The Simpsons* impact on popular culture cannot be overstated, and its legacy will continue to be felt for generations to come. Whether through its classic episodes, its contributions to meme culture, or its ability to adapt to changing times, *The Simpsons* has remained relevant and beloved by fans for over three decades, and its place in the pantheon of television history is secure (Fink, 2021).

Chapter 2 - Methodology

The purpose of this research is to analyse Irish political discourse through internet memes. This study looks at political memes created by members of the Ireland Simpsons Fans Facebook Group and that the memes are evidence of political engagement online in closed communities. Additionally, the research aims to portray the significance of internet memes as a tool of communication in political participation. This section will discuss the research design and outline the methods used to evaluate and structure the research project and will allow reader to gain an insight into how the research was conducted. The section will be divided into several headings including media theories, research design, limitations, and ethical considerations.

2.1 - Netnography

In our ever-increasing digital world, it is important for researchers to understand people's activities and interactions online. Netnography, a specialised form of ethnography adapted to the digital social world and provides a comprehensive understanding of contemporary social and cultural phenomena (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is an investigative approach used to examine online communities and cultures. It encompasses the examination of data obtained from various online platforms like forums, social media, and blogs, aiming to understand and extract valuable information regarding individuals' actions, beliefs, and engagements within these communities. Netnography recognizes that online social experiences are distinct from face-to-face interactions and presents three key differences. Firstly, entering online cultures requires a different approach and scope of inclusion. Secondly, gathering and analysing cultural data online present new challenges and opportunities. Finally, ethical considerations in online fieldwork differ from traditional research. Online communities form cultural systems with shared beliefs, values, and customs, and cyberculture refers to the unique aspects of online social formations. Online communities are integral to its members' daily experiences, and their study contributes to our understanding of social connections and cultural influences. With the significant number of people participating in online communities and the diverse range of interests they cover, netnography provides valuable insights into contemporary society and culture (Kozinets, 2010).

Online communities provide a sense of belonging, information, and emotional support that is highly valued by their members. They are not virtual but real communities with significant effects on behaviour and culture. The relationship between technology and culture is complex and co-determining, shaping each other in various aspects of society. Ethnography helps understand this transformation by considering specific contexts such as time, place, institutional histories, technical possibilities, and practical uses. Participation in online communities leads to the acquisition of information and an understanding of the community's language, norms, values, rituals, practices, preferences, and identities. This process forms cultural cohesion, empathy, and awareness of power dynamics. Online communities impact identity and social well-being, reducing social isolation and improving emotional well-being. They benefit individuals with social anxiety and enhance involvement in real-world communities. Overall, online communities like ISF, serve as spaces for information exchange, social connection, and meaning

construction, influencing individuals' identities and engagement in virtual and offline communities (Kozinets, 2010).

2.2 - Media Theories

In this section, the researcher will discuss some media and audience theories that will be used to inform the approach of the research analysis. Media research involves the ability to analyse, evaluate, and create media messages, understanding how they are constructed and how they shape our society. It helps individuals recognize when they are being manipulated by media and empowers them to create their own messages, becoming informed and engaged citizens capable of making informed decisions in a constantly evolving media environment (Kellner & Share, 2005). Media and culture are not merely a collection of objects such as television programmes, films or literature, but a process of practices. Culture revolves around the production and exchange of meanings among members of a society or group. Meaning is generated through our interactions with things and our interpretations of them. We give objects, people, and events meaning by employing frameworks of interpretation. Furthermore, we attribute meaning to things based on how we use them and incorporate them into our daily practices (Campbell, 2016). Meaning is produced and circulated through various locations and processes. These meanings play a crucial role in shaping our sense of identity and belonging, as well as the differentiation between groups. The generation and exchange of meaning occur continuously in our personal and social interactions (Campbell, 2016).

Stuart Hall, a prominent cultural theorist and sociologist, made significant contributions to our understanding of how people create and reproduce meaning from media and culture. In his work, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (1997), Hall discusses the concept of representation, which he defines as the process through which meaning is produced, circulated, and consumed in society. Hall argues that representations are not mere reflections of an objective reality but are socially constructed and shaped by power dynamics, ideologies, and cultural practices. The concept of representation plays a significant role in the study of culture as it connects meaning and language to cultural practices. Representation involves using language to convey meaningful information about the world to others. However, the process of representation is not straightforward, it is an essential part of how meaning is created and shared within a culture. Representation utilizes signs, images, and language to stand

for or represent things. According to Hall, media texts, such as television shows, films, and advertisements, play a critical role in the production and dissemination of these representations (Hall, 2003). Members of the same culture or group must share conceptual frameworks, images, and ideas that enable them to think and feel about the world in similar ways. This shared understanding, often referred to as "cultural codes," is essential for effective communication and interpretation. Language, both verbal and non-verbal, serves as a means to translate and convey these meanings (Hall, 2003). It involves not only spoken words but also visual images, music, body language, and facial expressions. However, the exchange of meaning is never fully understood or equal, as interpretations can vary (Campbell, 2016). Language is considered a signifying practice, a representational system through which culture operates (Hall, 2003). Other forms of representation, such as photography, film, and music, also function similarly by using various mediums to communicate specific meanings. Additionally, participating in activities like attending sporting events or concerts with banners, t-shirts slogans, and symbols can also be seen as a form of representation. It is important to note that there is no single correct interpretation of an image or message. Meanings are open to interpretation and can change over time (Campbell, 2016). The relationship between media and society can be complex, as media can play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes, beliefs, and values. In *Disability and representation* (2005) Rosemarie Garland-Thomson highlights the changing representation of disability in American society and how it is influenced by media and cultural narratives (Garland-Thomson, 2005). When we use images and stories from different sources like books movies, or popular culture, we are talking about representation. Representation means filling the physical world with meaning. Representation shapes our understanding of society and influences how the world looks, how resources are distributed, how we relate to each other, and how we see ourselves. Media representation plays a significant role not only in reflecting reality but also in shaping it. The way we perceive various aspects, including disability, through images and narratives has a profound impact on the material world. It influences how society is structured and how societal systems are organized. Media representation has the power to determine the inclusion or exclusion of individuals in crucial aspects of life, such as education, employment, and public spaces (Garland-Thomson, 2005).

According to Hall, audiences don't interact with media directly but through discursive translations of them. If something is meaningful for the audience, it will draw their interpretations and understanding. However, if there is no meaning or it's not articulated in practice, there will be no effect. Hall explains that meanings and messages are not just transmitted, but produced by actors who encode messages from the raw materials of everyday life, and by audiences within the context of other discourses. Encoding and decoding are not symmetrical, and misunderstandings are possible. In the context of television, encoding encompasses production, circulation, distribution, and reproduction, and these processes involve specific practices that don't guarantee subsequent moments. Although meaning is found at every level, it's not simply reproduced in the subsequent moment. Televised messages are polysemic, having various meanings that can be interpreted in various ways, but texts are structured in dominance, leading to a desired meaning, the meaning intended by the coder (Hall, 2005). David Morley (1992) utilized Hall's encoding-decoding model to investigate how English audiences received news stories presented on the television program *Nationwide* (Morley, 1992). He spent a number of weeks living with various English households, observing how families reacted to the programs they viewed. Morley discusses how communication works and how people understand messages differently depending on their culture and background and that viewers are not just passive receivers of information, but active interpreters who bring their own cultural background to the messages they receive. The media has an impact on how people think and talk about social issues, but this impact is not direct. Instead, the media sets the agenda for what people think about and how they talk about it. Sub-cultures within society interpret messages differently, and language is socially constructed and maintained (Morley, 1992). In the case of this study, media setting agenda is important, as memes often rely on shared references and social commentary to convey their meaning. It is important to understand how online communities like ISF interpret and construct meaning from the memes they create. As internet memes circulate rapidly across different platforms, they contribute to shaping public discourse by highlighting specific topics, events, or ideologies, thereby influencing what people engage with and discuss online (Milner, 2016). Ien Ang conducted a study on Dutch viewers of the TV show *Dallas*, using asymptomatic analysis to explore the attitudes behind the text (Ang, 2013). She argued that viewers were actively involved in the production of meaning and

pleasure, and that their diverse subjectivities shaped their responses. To gather data for her study, Ang placed an advertisement in a Dutch women's magazine and received 42 responses. She found that viewers' enjoyment of Dallas was linked to the degree of realism they perceived in the series. When the story was considered realistic, viewers responded positively, but negatively when they thought it was unrealistic. Ang concluded that the emotional realism offered by Dallas was both denotative and connotative, and that viewers were critical of the broadcasts they saw. Her study challenged the idea that audiences are passive beings who respond to messages in predictable ways, and instead presented a heterogeneous perspective (Ang, 2013). The idea of an audience is socially constructed, and media producers create content for an imagined audience that advertisers then buy as a commodity. In the past, the creation of a mass audience was central to the development of mass media and measuring audience sizes was necessary to persuade advertisers to advertise. The measurement and definition of audiences continue to be important in the digital media age, with businesses in various industries valuing audiences more than customers. Audience measurement is political and part of a politics of knowledge where the audience is rendered as a controllable, objective other (Ang, 1991). For example, Facebook records user interactions and transforms them into data that is used for advertising and tailoring content, with the data's value communicated through interactive visuals (Van Couvering, 2022).

The audience is an important part of media and culture, and the internet has changed how they engage with it. The word "audience" suggests a collective identity, and audiences are categorised based on their presence in a space and time, including physically present audiences, mass audiences consuming media together, and fragmented audiences across different platforms (Ouellette & Gray, 2017). In the case of this study the "audience" are the members of ISF who create, share and interact with memes in the ISF Facebook group. Audiences are not just passive consumers; they now actively create meaning through their own content, such as online reviews, fan fiction, and internet memes. However, traditional audience types and linear media still exist alongside increased audience activity online. With the internet, interactions between different audience types have become more distinct (Ouellette & Gray, 2017). For example, the premiere of a new series of a popular television show like Game of Thrones (2011 – 2019) or Sherlock (2010-2017) can attract a large audience, but

viewers can also watch the premiere on-demand. The audience shifts between mass and simple audience positions to show their dedication and distinguish themselves as fans of the series. They can also move from a diffused to a mass audience position by sharing reviews and tweets after the initial broadcast. Audiences can transition from simple to mass or diffused audiences through social media. They can share photos from in person events, which may be picked up by mass media, or circulate tweets and videos within the networked audience. Representations of audiences are constructed and don't directly reflect the actual audience. However, studying audiences is still valuable. It is crucial to analyse how audience discourses shape interactions, cultural values, and power dynamics among different audiences. It is important to study audiences not only in relation to the texts they consume but also in terms of their interactions with each other, challenging the idea that audiences only exist in media-centric practices (Ouellette & Gray, 2017).

Additionally, Ang (1995) outlines the importance of reception analysis when studying the audience. The concept of reception analysis, developed in the 1980s, is a method for studying how audiences create meaning from media texts. According to Ang, media texts do not have inherent meanings but instead acquire meaning when received by the audience. Audience members are seen as active creators of meaning, and their personal social experiences, cultural affiliations, and everyday events play a role in how they interpret media texts. Ang also notes the concept of interpretive communities, which are groups of people who produce shared readings of a text, and subcultures, which are smaller groups within dominant cultures that are centred around factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or geography (Ang, 1995). In *Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture* (2018), Henry Jenkins briefly discusses interpretive communities in online fan communities. Jenkins explains that when we consume media, we interpret it in our own unique way based on personal associations and experiences (Jenkins, 2018). However, the process becomes culturally significant when these interpretations are shared by a larger group. Groups of people who interpret a text in a similar way are called interpretive communities. These communities have certain norms or rules for interpretation, such as noticing specific aspects of a story, assigning meanings to symbols, shaping expectations about the plot, and sharing theories. Even within an interpretive community, members may not always agree on interpretations. However, these spaces thrive when there is some agreement on plausible interpretations.

Studies on fan communities focused on networked patterns of consumption and interpretation. Even before the internet, fandoms formed around the desire to discuss and interpret their favourite media. These communities developed their own unique ways of interpretation, social interaction, and cultural production based on their shared passions and interests (Jenkins, 2018). These communities, rather than individuals or texts, produce meanings through shared interpretive strategies. Online interpretive communities collaborate and produce ideas through sharing, transformation, and co-creation, benefiting both individuals and the community as a whole (Buoziš, 2022). The ISF Facebook group for example, functions as an online interpretive community as members share a common interest or identity (in this case Irishness or living in Ireland) gather around a central object (*The Simpsons* memes) and engage in discursive practices (discussing politics) to produce meanings collectively. Facebook groups facilitate sharing and collection of posts, while members can transform or remix the memes in their own interpretations and other members can respond to the content through post reactions and post comments (Buoziš, 2022).

In summary, using these key approaches to media research this study will examine how political discourse is shaped, interpreted, and communicated through memes within the context of an Irish online meme community. As an interpretive community, members of ISF play an active role in creating memes and giving them meaning. Shared cultural codes and frameworks of interpretation are an important aspect of online groups like ISF, and representation in these memes can have an impact on societal attitudes and beliefs. By studying memes posted in ISF, we can understand how members collectively produce meanings through the sharing and creation of memes and engage in discursive practices and discussions related to politics.

2.3 - Data collection and analysis

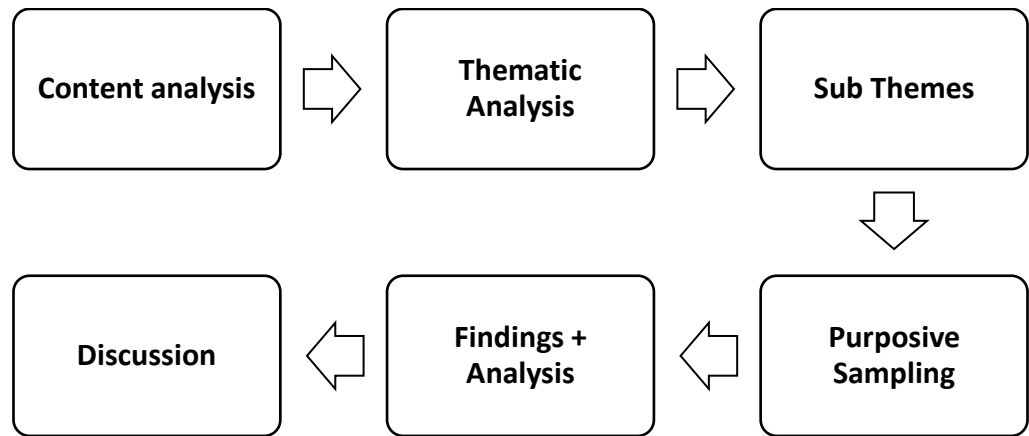


Figure 20 - Data collection and analysis process

For the purpose of this study, a mixed method research approach was used. Mixed method research is the process of collecting and analysing data through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research processes. This style of research is often used as an approach to acquire more meaningful data through the combined strengths of quantitative and qualitative research and simultaneously compensating for each method's weaknesses (Punch, 2014). However, while the study uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods, qualitative analysis was the primary type of analysis used to evaluate the collected data. Qualitative research involves numerous types of analysis that work best when analysing data such as images and text (Neuman, 2011). This type of analysis works best for this study as it can help us understand the meanings that are being communicated in memes collected as part of the research. Understanding the meanings expressed through internet memes is important as online users express their beliefs and ideologies with other users in an online community (Shifman, 2014). Therefore, qualitative research is used in this study to identify various themes and meaning from the combination of image and text used in memes posted on the Ireland Simpsons Fans Facebook Group. Through the mixed method approach, a combination of content analysis and thematic analysis was used. Content analysis is a type of textual analysis used to examine "the content or information and symbols contained in written documents or other communication media" (Neuman, 2011, p. 371). When doing a content analyse, you collect the content of a text. The text can be anything that is presented as a form of communication, this can be written material like

books, spoken material like radio programmes or visual material such as television shows. Additionally, the content can be any form communicated message such as symbols, themes, pictures, information, words and meanings. Content analysis determines or counts how often certain themes or patterns are communicated through a piece of text (Neuman, 2011). In this study a content analysis was used to collect memes from the Ireland Simpsons Fans Facebook Group, where the text was the memes posted in the group and the content that was the meanings, themes and symbols presented in the memes. Thematic analysis is a form of data analysis that reports and identifies patterns and themes from research data and organises the data into valued information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a popular form of qualitative research and is used widely across a range of academic studies (Nowell, et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is flexible and is useful when working examining different perspectives within larger amount of data. The researcher used thematic analysis to analyse the themes collected during the content analysis stage. Furthermore, when conducting a thematic analysis, the themes within the research data can be either inductive or theoretical. Inductive analysis is primarily data driven where the themes come directly from the data and are not determined by the researcher's interest in the topic. Whereas theoretical analysis is primarily analyst-driven, and the themes are determined by the researcher's interest of the research topic leading to a more a thorough form of data analysis. Additionally, the themes can appear in semantic or latent levels, where the researcher can focus on explicit or surface meanings on the semantic level or examine the underlying ideas and meanings on the latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

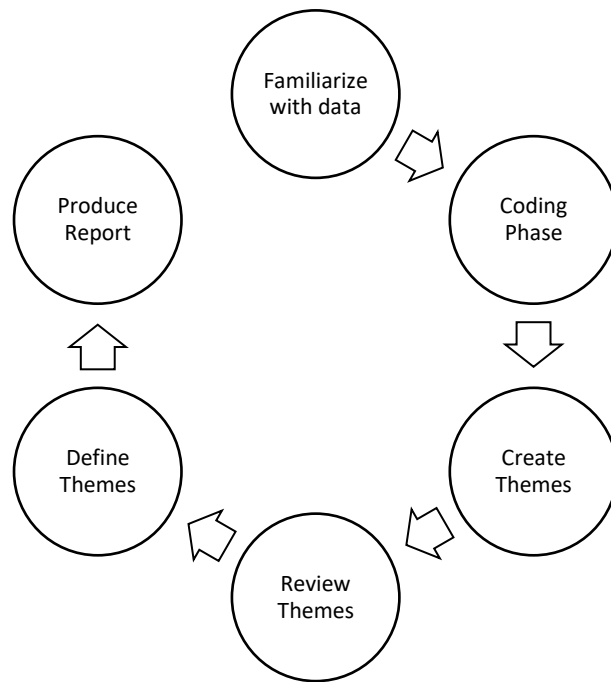


Figure 21 - Braun & Clarke, 2006, steps of thematic analysis

Through a content analysis, the data for this research was collected randomly during the months of November 2019 and January – March 2020. The researcher decided not to collect data in December 2019 as the majority of memes during that period were Christmas related and felt that the holiday season would impact the flow of the content posted in the Facebook group. The data was retrieved from the Ireland Simpsons Fans public Facebook group by screen shotting the memes and downloading them to a folder on the researcher’s computer. The folders were titled after the month during which the data was collected. The Microsoft programme “Snipping Tool” was used to take screenshots of the memes and the main text, name and profile photo of the user who posted the meme and as well as the names, profile photos of users who commented on that post. After the collection process was completed, the researcher went onto the second phase of content analysis where they examined the data, detected, and counted recurring patterns and themes that appeared.

Using Microsoft Excel the recurring themes were outlined on a spreadsheet according to their relevant categories that the meme depicted. Additionally, after the theme of a meme was identified it was then copied and pasted to another folder, where the folder was categorised after that particular theme. During the collecting process, memes that

directly depict Irish life were the main form of data collected, this included references to everyday Irish life, growing up in Ireland, Irish identity etc. Additionally, memes that referred to broader topics were purposely left out. Such as memes that do not primarily depict Irishness/living in Ireland and worldwide politics, sports, entertainment etc are not included in the data sample. This was because the Ireland Simpsons Fans receives hundreds of new posts a day and there would be too many memes to analyse after the data collection has ended. During analysis, the researcher removed memes that were repeated, either by being reposted by the same user on another day or reposted by another member of the group. After this first phase of content analysis, the researcher had a total of 2986 memes (Figure 22) and categorised the memes within 15 identifiable themes (Figure 23). After completing the first phase of content analysis, the researcher proceeded to the second phase, focusing on memes related to the topic with the highest number of memes which was Irish Government and Irish Politicians. In this subsequent phase, the researcher further refined the content by identifying and analysing subthemes within these memes (Figure 24).

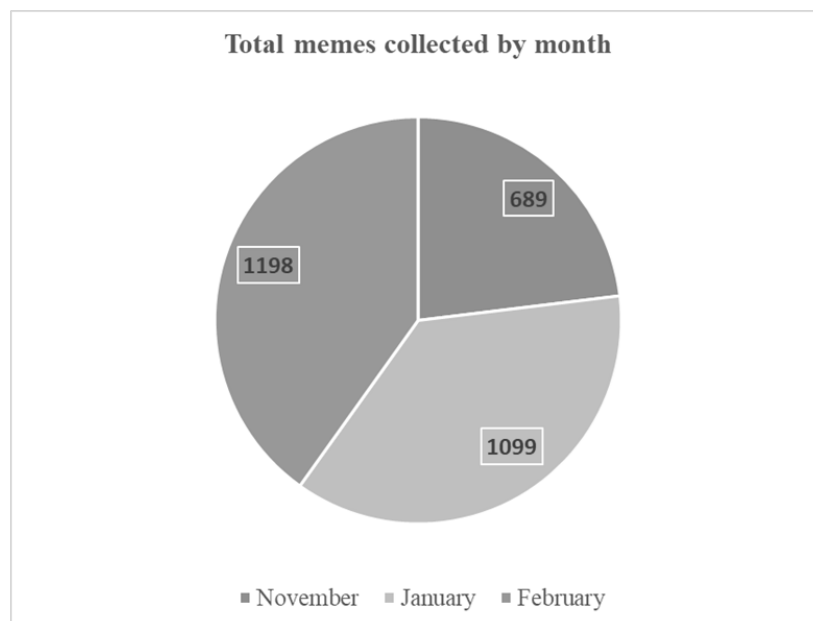


Figure 22 - Total memes collected by month.

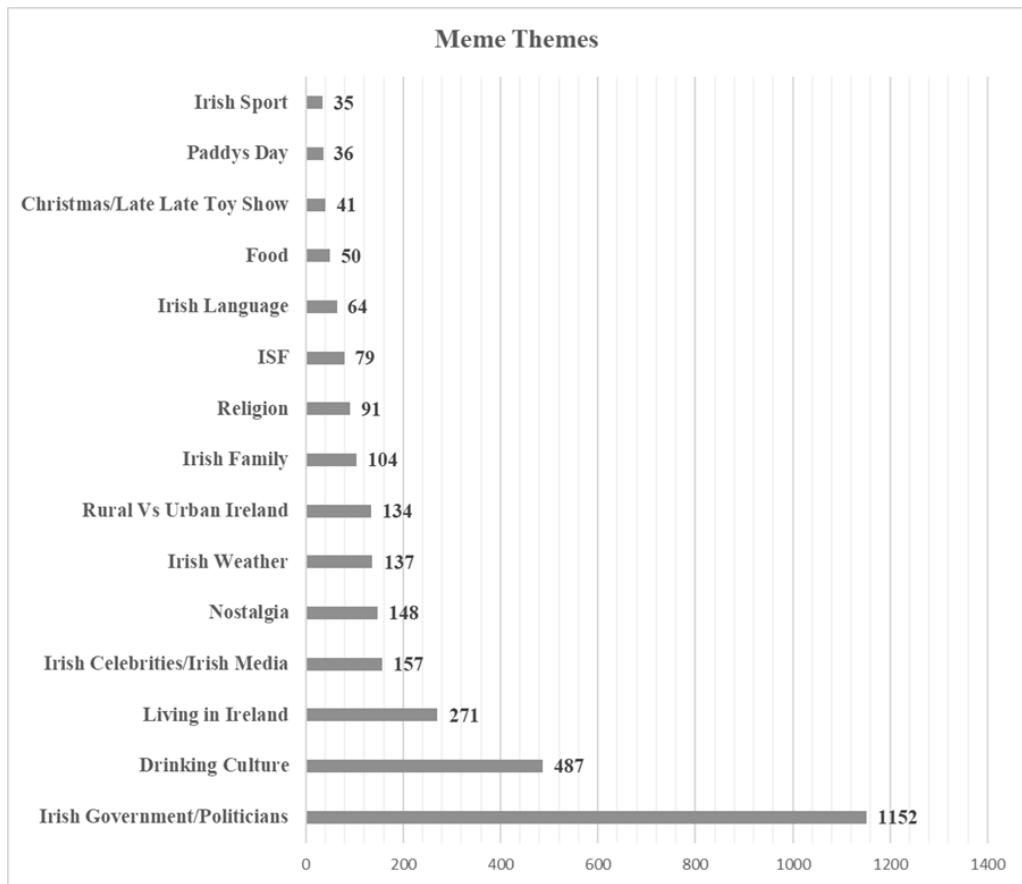


Figure 23 - Themes after the first phase of content analysis.

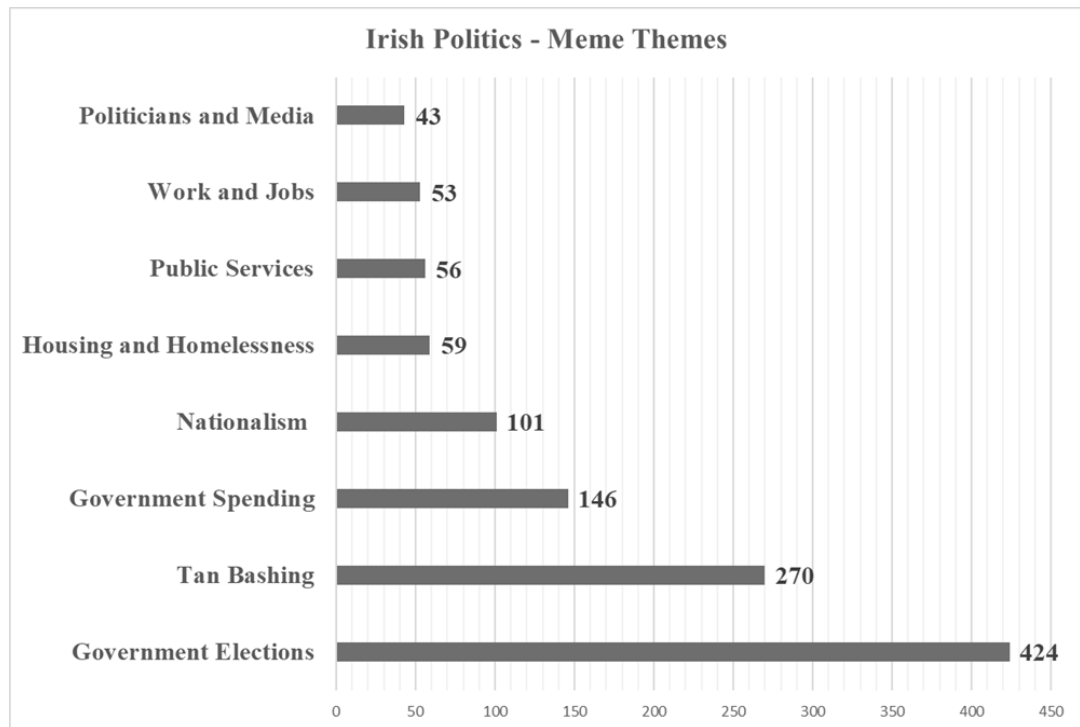


Figure 24 - Themes after the second phase of content analysis.

After completing the content analysis, the researcher then went onto the next phase of the research which was thematic analysis. For this study a theoretical process was used during the data analysis stage, as the researcher has an interest of the research topic as well as knowledge gathered while researching the topic for the literature review portion of this study. The first phase of analysis began by examining the initial themes identified during the content analysis and coding the data into sub-themes where the theme refers to a broader narrative and meanings depicted in the data analysed. The researcher used a mixed method assessment of both content and thematic analysis to examine 1152 memes posted on the Ireland Simpson's Fan group during the month of November 2019 and January – March 2020. The 1152 sample memes were analysed as follows:

1. Analysis of the external event, individual or story the meme is referring to.
2. Analysis of the meaning embedded within the meme.

The meaning behind the meme was captured in this study by reiterating or paraphrasing the meme. Specifically using both content and thematic analysis to evaluate the context of the scene used in the meme, the characters used and the roles the characters have

within the meme. This included identifying the context and characters and outlining what they represent in the meme, and then coding them by the themes they represent. The researcher utilised purposive sampling to select a number of memes to illustrate the data during the findings and discussion section. Purposive sampling is where “the researcher selects subjects or elements that possess the specific characteristics or qualities required for the study” (Weerakkody, 2015, p. 99). These select memes provide valuable insight into the ideas and views of Irish political events that frequently occurred throughout the data collection process.

2.4 - Ethics

In any form of research, it's important to be aware of ethical issues that may arise during the research process such as privacy and confidentiality. The researcher is aware that their own biases and views may possibly affect the selection and interpretation of the research data. The researcher held heightened awareness of their own political and cultural standpoint when conducting this study and engaged "in the self-reflective process of "bracketing", whereby they recognize and set aside (but do not abandon) their prior knowledge and assumptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 83). Therefore, this study was conducted through a neutral and non-judgemental lens. As this research primarily focuses on memes posted in a Facebook group it is important to briefly discuss the ethical considerations of this research. Groups on Facebook can be created by any user on the platform with a registered Facebook account. This includes fans, celebrities, amateurs, businesses, politicians and non-profit organisations (Facebook, 2022). When a user creates a Facebook group, they are given a choice between two privacy options:

- "Public: anyone on or off Facebook can see who's in the group and what they post."
- "Private: only members can see who's in the group and what they post."

(Facebook, 2022).

The ethics of researching memes from a public online community introduces a unique set of ethical considerations, particularly in relation to obtaining informed consent. When studying memes from public meme groups like ISF (which allows unrestricted access) researchers must grapple with the fact that these groups are created with the intention of sharing content widely (Mielczarek & Hopkins, 2021). As a result, obtaining explicit consent from each individual meme creator can be challenging. Moreover, memes are often remixed and shared by countless individuals within these groups, blurring the lines of ownership and complicating the consent process even further. Furthermore, when conducting research on memes that utilize copyrighted material such as imagery from *The Simpsons* (1989), it is crucial to respect the principles of fair use, which allow for limited use of copyrighted material for purposes such as criticism, commentary, or academic research. Determining the boundaries of fair use in the context of

memes can be challenging, as the transformative nature of memes often blurs the lines between original and derivative works (Mielczarek & Hopkins, 2021).

In this study content analysis was used, which is a nonintrusive and nonreactive method of measurement, the researcher primarily focused on examining the visual content, text, reactions and post comments, rather than the content creators themselves. However, to ensure ethical standards, the identities of individuals within the group were concealed, thus preserving their anonymity (Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017). Anonymizing and deidentifying memes can help protect the privacy of individuals involved, reducing the risk of unintended consequences. Additionally, no sensitive data was involved in the research, and all collected data is stored securely on a private computer with limited access only to the researcher. Once the thesis and project are completed, all data, except for the paper itself, will be deleted. The data will only be used for the purposed study and not shared with other third parties (SETU Carlow, 2021). The researcher agrees to comply with the legal requirements in relation to the storage and use of personal data as set down by the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016 and the Data Protection Acts 1988-2018 and any subsequent applicable legislation. The purpose of adopting and implementing these measures was to ensure that the data, as presented, obscured any identifiable connection to the members in the group (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019).

2.5 - Limitations

Research on online groups can provide valuable insights into contemporary culture, social behaviour, and the impact of online communities. However, conducting research in online communities can be challenging due to limitations imposed by censorship, editing, and filtering by group moderators and administrators. For instance, some posts in these groups may be removed for being deemed inappropriate, offensive, or violating group rules, making it difficult to obtain a representative sample of posts that accurately reflects the memes produced and shared in the group. Another limitation is the difficulty of obtaining a representative sample of the content posted in the group. Online communities can vary widely in size, content, and demographics, and researchers may not be able to access a large enough sample to draw meaningful conclusions. Furthermore, the members of these groups may not be representative of the wider population, and findings from these studies may not generalize to other contexts (Chen & Xu, 2021). Additionally, it is important to note that the ISF group has thousands of members, and the group receives hundreds of meme submissions daily. Therefore, researchers cannot be certain of a member's motives for creating a meme or fully comprehend their reasons. As a result, the findings in this study are subject to the researcher's interpretation (Wong, et al., 2021).

Chapter 3 - Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study is to analyze Irish political discourse through internet memes created by members of the Ireland Simpsons Fans Facebook Group. In this section, the researcher will start with an introduction providing the background of Ireland Simpsons Fans. This will be followed by a presentation of the findings from the content and thematic analysis. The findings will be separated into three sections based on the most memed-about topics around Irish politics that occurred during the data collection period. The three sections will cover government criticism, anti-British sentiment, and government elections.

3.1 - Ireland Simpsons Fans

When any group of Irish men are just over a quarter of the way through their current pints.
#pintposting



694

114 comments 8 shares

Figure 25 - Ireland Simpson Fans – Pintposting meme

Ireland Simpsons Fans (ISF) is an online community dedicated to sharing memes based on scenes from the popular US animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (1989). Since its creation in 2016, ISF has become a popular forum for political discourse in Ireland. The group was founded by two Irish college students who were members of a UK-based Simpsons meme group who felt that a Simpsons meme group needed an Irish touch (Hanratty, 2019). As of 2023, the ISF Facebook group has over 166k members and other social platforms, which they use to share best of content from Facebook, have over 93.3K followers on Twitter and 30.5K followers on Instagram. The Facebook group is public which means anyone can request to join and is the main source of interaction and meme production, receiving over 300 meme submissions a day. The group is managed by a team of volunteers who are working or in college and devote their time to the page out of passion for the community and majority of members in the group are aged 18 – 35 years old (Daly, 2019). ISF is a well-known meme group in Irish society that has gained media attention (Hanratty, 2019) due to their ability to create numerous memes related to current events and Irish culture. ISF is an example of a grassroots source of discourse, where political ideas and ideology are intertwined with cultural content and social commentary (Goulding, 2021). ISF is a thriving community that creates original

Simpsons memes and emphasizes the importance of fresh content. The group has several rules, including creating only original memes that are related to *The Simpsons* and not repost content from other websites or members. Members are expected to be respectful towards others and avoid engaging in debates in the comment section (Ireland Simpson Fans, 2023).

I thought we were having steamed hams.

No! I said Bags of Cans!



2.2K

149 comments • 56 shares

Figure 26 - ISF Steamed Hams/Bag of cans meme mash up

Members of ISF use screenshots from early iconic *The Simpsons* episodes to comment on current political issues on social media, either by shedding light on issues or by criticizing them. During its golden years, *The Simpsons* portrayed those in positions of power through parody, satire and slapstick comedy. The show provided a simplified language for people to mock influential figures through humour and the same style of humour is being used in memes based on the show. The increasing absurdity of worldwide politics have made memes a dominant mode of discourse to digest and explain the craziness of the world in recent years, such as the 2016 US elections (Lanigan, 2019). The simple format of combining iconic scenes with text allows for easy participation. The content of ISF is diverse and depends on the latest trends and

news, however content relating to Irish culture and society is popular. Memes about Irish drinking culture (pintposting, bag of cans, Figure 25 and Figure 26) Irish identity and growing up in Ireland (drinking flat 7up when ill, Figure 27) are popular.



Figure 27 - ISF Flat 7up meme

The group's success and ability to convey the complexities of politics through the universal language of *The Simpsons* is attributed to the Irish people's familiarity with the show, which has been a staple in their daily lives for years (Krishna, 2019). For many Irish millennials and some Gen Z, *The Simpsons* was a central part of their after-school routine when the show aired daily on RTÉ 2 at 7pm in the late 90's early 2000's (UCC Express, 2018). Jack Leahy one of ISF's founders believes the page's popularity is due to *The Simpsons'* ability to reflect and comment on real-world situations in a reactive way and the page is a fascinating example of how young people today understand and talk about the world. Additionally, the group's admins see the value of memes as legitimate societal discourse, with the page serving as a barometer for the public's opinions on various political and social issues. Leahy believes that memes have a legitimate role in societal discourse, as they can make certain concepts more relatable and easier to understand. Another admin of ISF sees group's advantage over mainstream news as they don't need to generate content themselves and members can quickly react to breaking news (Hanratty, 2019).



Figure 28 - ISF posts their “best of” memes to Twitter and Instagram

The group is a good example of *The Simpsons*' resurgence on the internet (Lanigan, 2019) and preserves the show's original spirit while reflecting the ridiculousness of modern life, using the show's material to offer fresh perspectives on current events and creating relatable content. In terms of a political ideology, ISF takes a left-leaning stance, however the group does allow post and commentary from different political perspectives. There have been instances where discussions have become heated, and moderators would have to step in to block harmful content or remove members for harassment. Unlike other meme groups, ISF embraces the show's left-leaning politics and aims to push against extremism and whitewashing rather than promote it (Klee, 2019). Through its content, ISF manages to editorialize without being controversial and subvert norms without punching down. ISF inspires its members to analyse and reinterpret familiar moments from *The Simpsons* (1989) in new and creative ways, by putting a fresh spin on classic moments from the show and revitalizing jokes that may have lost their humour over the years. (Klee, 2019). Finally, ISF is not just a community

to post memes, they also uses their platform to raise money for different charities and initiatives, they have held quiz nights to raise money for ALONE, a charity that gives support to older people (Farrelly, 2020), raised over €12,051 for the Irish Cancer Society (Hussey, 2020), sold jumpers and t shirts in aid of charities that support people in direct provision (Ireland Simpsons Fans, 2019) and REPEAL the 8th campaigns (McGrath, 2018).

3.2 - Topic 1: Government criticism – White water rafting and the Dáil printer.

Context and Meme Examples

During this study there were two events that occurred involving public spending by the Irish government that received widespread criticism from the Irish public, including the Ireland Simpsons Fans Facebook group. On Wednesday, November 27th, 2019, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce posted a tweet on their Twitter page announcing plans for a new White-Water Rafting Centre in Dublin City Centre. The planned facility would be built on George's Dock in the Dublin City Docklands beside the CHQ Dublin building, a retail and events facility where food and drink festivals such as Oktoberfest and Christmas Markets are held throughout the year (Thomas, 2023). According to Dublin City Council the estimated cost for the project was over €20 million and would take around 18 months to be completed with construction beginning before the end of 2020. The centre was to offer facilities for a variety of people who want to engage in water sports and recreational activities in the heart of the city, such as kayaking, canoeing, and river rafting, which would be accessible to tourists, club canoeists, elite athletes, and emergency services. The development was proposed as a venue to boost recreational and competitive water sports along the River Liffey. The planned facility would provide a water-based recreational facility using the existing George's Dock basin, a historically protected structure in Dublin's City Centre (Thomas, 2023).

According to a report commissioned by Dublin City Council, an estimate of 11,000 people would potentially use the site in its first year with a predicted total of 37,000 visitors each year after its fifth year of operation. The cost for visitors would be an estimate of €50 person or €150 per raft for a family of six. Additionally, the report estimates €484,000 will be made in profits in year one, raising to over €1.6 million by the fifth year (Burns, 2019). The Council proposed to use a combination of sports capital grants, development levies, and other sources to fund the construction of the water rafting centre. Representatives of Dublin City Council said that the proposed water rafting centre would “be really good for tourism” and “will bring jobs into the area” (Pollak, 2021). The facility was “expected to be a major tourist attraction as well as catering for members of the public” including schools, local community and youth groups and “will play a key role in community development of the North-East inner

city” (Thomas, 2023). While there were potential positives to opening a water rafting facility in Dublin city centre, the project received a lot of criticism from elected officials and members of the public. Around the time plans were announced, Ireland was in the midst of a decade-long housing crisis, with rents spiralling out of control and continuing to rise each year (O’Shea, 2019). One Dublin City Councillor member described the project as “shameful”, “unbelievable and out of touch with reality” (Slater, 2021). Other councillors described it as a “political obscenity” and an “elitist” and “grotesque vanity project” (The Times, 2021). Members of the public expressed their opposition to the project across social media, one person on Twitter replied to the original tweet posted by Dublin Chamber of Commerce with “Who asked for this? Hardly a priority in a country suffering from the worst homelessness crisis in modern times” another tweeted “Considering the numerous problems in Dublin right now, especially with homelessness, green-lighting this is all the proof you need that many in Dublin City Council are utterly out of touch” (Dublin Chamber of Commerce, 2019).



Figure 29 - Government criticism meme example 1

The water rafting proposal was heavily satirised on ISF. In Figure 29, we see Springfield’s richest and most powerful man Mr Burns speaking to an angry audience and asking, “Are you saying adequate housing or white-water rafting?” while a mock up

image of the whiter-water rafting centre is shown on the big screen. This scene is from "A Star Is Burns", episode eighteenth of season six (1995), where the citizens of Springfield hold a film festival to boost the town's popularity. Many of the townspeople of Springfield enter films into the festival including Mr Burns who hopes to promote his image, steering away from the evil plant owner of Springfield and win the town's adoration. Burns decides to make a big biopic film about his life to make people like him more. Since Steven Spielberg isn't available, he hires Steven Spielberg's "non-union, Mexican equivalent," Seor Spielbergo, to direct the movie. Burns ends up playing himself in the movie after they fail to find the perfect actor to play him. At the end of the festival, Mr Burns' movie entitled "A Burns for All Seasons" is shown. The film features multiple parodies of scenes from popular movies such as ET and Ben-Hur where Mr Burns plays the lead showing generosity and kindness to other characters who represent the people of Springfield. The film ends with a heavenly light shining down upon Burns as if God is showing how much of a good person Burns really is. However, the movie receives a negative response from the audience who criticise it as nothing more than a badly made, ego-driven attempt to show him in a better light, the audience starts to boo the film. Mr Burns assistant Smithers tries to dismiss the booing by saying that they were cheering "Boo-urns,". Mr Burns then stands up and asks the audience "Are you saying Boo or Boo-urns?" the audience then boos louder and starts throwing food at him. The meme points to a feeling of inequality where the decisions of the elite are not just out-of-touch with public sentiment but are impacting the everyday lives of people in terms of their ability to live or make a home in the capital city. The meme works because it suggests the government's interests and intentions are at odds with those of the public and are informed by an elitist lens and motivations. In this way it is very similar to Mr. Burns' film, a vanity project to advance his own interests and boost his ego.

The second event occurred in November 2019, where Irish government officials came under fire after reports emerged on the purchase of a €808,000 printer for Dáil Éireann, which would not fit into the building of the Oireachtas (the Irish houses of parliament). In late 2018, the Irish government spent €808,000 on a brand-new Komori GL-429 printing press to meet the printing needs of elected members of Dáil Éireann. However, when the printer showed up in December 2018, officials came to the realization that it could not fit in the building. After noticing the error, they could not return the printer to its UK

manufacturer as the contract had already been signed. Therefore, they moved the printer to a storage facility in a Ballymount Industrial Estate in Dublin, paying €2,000 a month in storage fees. While the printer remained in storage, the Oireachtas building was undergoing renovations in order to provide room for the enormous machine. According to RTÉ the door frames of the parliament building were removed, the walls were taken down, and structural steel was inserted in the building in order to provide it the height clearance required to operate the machine. After months of construction, the printer was finally brought into the building of Oireachtas on 28th September 2019. Despite the fact that the printer was now operational, employees refused to use it, claiming they needed training and extra pay before using it, furthermore the workers in the IT department refused to grant the printer server permissions meaning it couldn't function (Carroll, 2019). The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Dáil was provided with a comprehensive report that detailed extra expenditures in addition to those that were previously stated to when they first purchased the printer. In the 15-page report it confirmed that when related equipment and construction costs were taken into account, the actual cost for the printer was over €2 million. As a result of the debacle later described as #PrinterGate on social media, there was an outpour of public and political anger, as well as demands for increased transparency in Dáil Eireann. As one councillor stated "It is all too common for a lack of planning and foresight on behalf of government departments to result in additional costs for the taxpayer" (Carroll, 2019). Another councillor remarked that the printer was a clear waste of taxpayer money and that the public were fed up of failures in the public sector with no one being held responsible (Finn, 2019). Additionally, critics stated that the Irish government has a habit of failing to complete projects on schedule and under budget. The implementation of a €3 billion rural broadband scheme announced in 2019, which was expected to cost €500 million in 2014, and the cost of building a new children's hospital in Dublin is expected to increase over €2 billion despite being priced at €800 million in 2014 (Carroll, 2019).

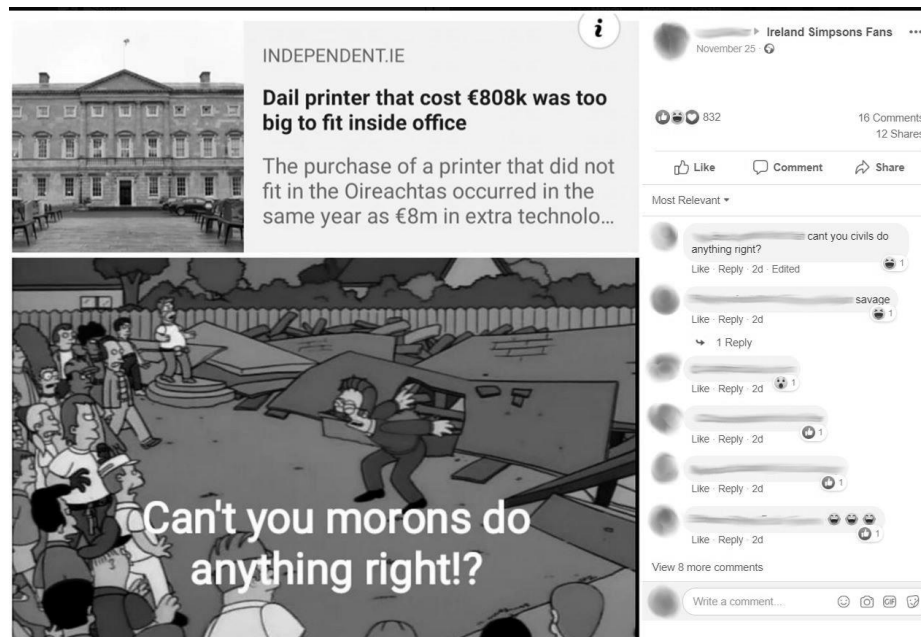


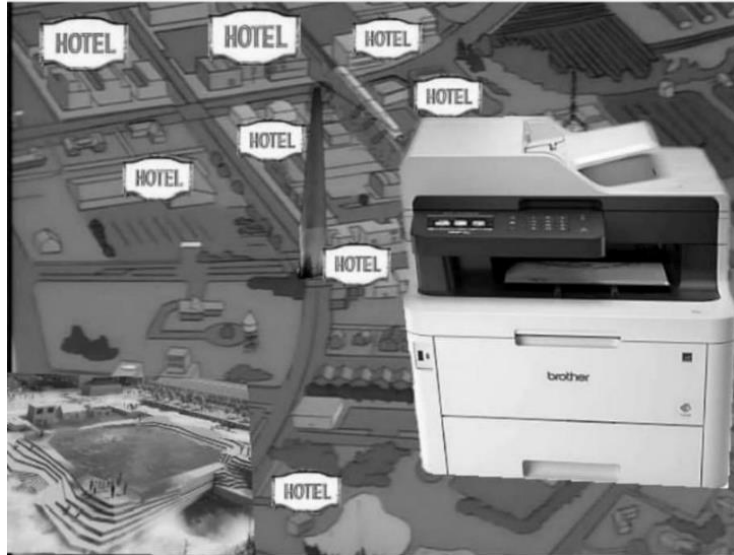
Figure 30 - Government criticism meme example 2

On ISF, a flood of memes appeared in relation to the printer debacle. In Figure 30, we see a headline from the Independent.ie which says, “Dáil printer that cost €808k was too big to fit inside office”. Underneath we see an image of Ned Flanders shouting at the townsfolk of Springfield “Can’t you morons do anything right!?”. This scene is from "Hurricane Neddy" episode eight of Season eight (1996). In the episode, a hurricane blows through Springfield and only destroys the home of Flanders family who are neighbours to the Simpsons. The family is left homeless and have to take refuge in the church basement. The next day, the townsfolk of Springfield rebuild the Flanders home in an attempt to show their community spirit and love for the Flanders family. Marge takes Ned and his family to the rebuilt home. Ned is usually outgoing and positive, however due to the recent bout of bad luck, he is negative and sarcastically asks Marge if the rubble has burned down but is overjoyed to see his home now rebuilt. That is until he inspects the house and sees the shoddy workmanship, loose nails sticking out of wall, painted dirt on the floor to make it look like tiled flooring and a toilet in the kitchen. Ned becomes frustrated and exits the house. When leaving, Homer asks Ned how much he loves the house that love built, and the house suddenly collapses into rubble. At his wits end, Ned goes into a fit of rage and snaps at the townsfolk saying "AW HELL-DIDDILY-DING DONG CRAP! CAN'T YOU MORONS DO ANYTHING RIGHT?!". In the meme context, Ned Flanders represents the frustrated Irish public and the

Springfield townsfolk representing the Irish government, who while having the best intentions, end up making a mess and everything comes crumbling down.

Another meme aligned the failures related to the printer with wider failings in government planning, specifically how housing and other kinds of accommodation were granted permits in Dublin city centre (Figure 28). The housing crisis in Ireland has been a persistent problem for many years, with a lack of affordable housing and high rent prices contributing to widespread homelessness and housing insecurity. Critics argue that the government's response has been inadequate, with a focus on incentivizing private developers rather than investing in public housing. The lack of affordable housing has resulted in a significant number of people being homeless or living in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation. The government's response to the issue of homelessness has been criticised for being reactive rather than proactive. The building of short-term accommodation such as hotels has been prioritised over long-term solutions such as the construction of new social housing units (Pope, 2020). This has resulted in a situation where there are over 10,000 people homeless in Ireland (Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 2023). Additionally, there has been criticism that Dublin city is losing its culture due to the new hotel projects taking over cultural venues leading to protests proclaiming tourist accommodation is being prioritised over the arts and needs of the locals (Meagher, 2021). These worries were expressed in ISF around the time there were discussions about the water rafting centre and the Dáil printer. In Figure 31, we see an overhead shot of the Town of Springfield, however as stated in the text box from the producer it is an image of what Dublin would look like in 2021. With the Spire in the centre, the city would be overrun with hotels along with the water rafting centre at one side of the city and a giant printer at the other end.

Dublin 2021



👍👎 2K

39 comments • 20 shares

Figure 31 - Government criticism meme example 3

Discussion

ISF has become an important space for Irish people to take part in political discourse. ISF has allowed Irish internet users to create content and discuss politics outside the mainstream media and criticize government freely in a way that wouldn't have been possible before (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). As discussed earlier, governments are one of the most scrutinized and talked about entities in the media and have not escaped the critical eye of meme communities, becoming sources of mockery through memes. Memes are a way for people to express their dissatisfaction with government decisions and to hold politicians accountable for their actions (Takovski, 2019). This is perfectly illustrated in Figures 29-31 where members of ISF share their dissatisfaction over the Irish government's decisions to spend exorbitant amounts of money on a water-rafting centre and a large printer in the Dáil. By subverting the government's discourse and hijacking the narrative, humour can expose the absurdity of the government's actions and creates a space for criticism that avoids serious repercussions. This is evident in Figure 31, where we see the giant Dáil printer taking over a large part of Dublin City.

The humour in ISF is used as a mechanism to ridicule and criticize the Irish government in a harmless way (Takovski, 2019).

The use of humour in ISF's memes helps to attract people to political issues and can help convey messages to a wider audience. As illustrated in Figure 31, ISF use memes to highlight important issues in Irish society such as the housing crisis. This type of meme can make people more interested and informed about everyday issues and the use of humour helps to make the message more engaging and easier to understand (Laineste, et al., 2022). The increasing use of memes in politics is seen as a way to give power to ordinary people and to share their views on important issues and express themselves in a political context (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020). The memes made by ISF shown in this section indicate a prime example of how satire and criticism are delivered through humour. While it may seem like harmless fun, it is still a form of political commentary that addresses real concerns. The criticism of the public spending by the Irish government indicates the highly politicized nature of memes as a form of communication. ISF members have harnessed the power of social media to make their voices heard, and their use of humour and satire has helped them to gain a wider audience. Reactions to the memes used in this section show high engagement and interactions (likes/reacts, comments and shares) signalling that other ISF members relate or agree with the message depicted in the memes. Furthermore, criticism and humour are still criticism, and the messages conveyed through ISF memes are not to be taken lightly. Instead, they are a reflection of the frustrations and concerns of Irish citizens who feel that their voices are not being heard by the Irish government, therefore they create and share memes in ISF to express their frustrations. ISF provide a platform for the Irish people to voice their opinions and hold those in power accountable. This, in turn, has the potential to bring about real change in society, and highlights the importance of political discourse through humorous user generated content. The types of memes that appear on ISF might also be categorised as political humour. Political humour refers to humour that is critical of politics and is often seen in political cartoons. It reflects on past events and their social and political consequences and can influence people's opinions and actions. ISF's use of memes to criticize the Irish government is an extension of political satire. Political satire has a long history, from the satirical cartoons of James Gillray and Thomas Nast in the 19th century to the modern-day political commentary of shows like *The Daily Show* (Gray, et al., 2009).

Political satire uses humour and irony to highlight the absurdity and hypocrisy of political power, and to hold those in power accountable for their actions. As mentioned earlier during the discussion of *The Simpsons*, satire is the heart of the show. *The Simpsons* uses characters to reflect common societal failings through a satirical lens. It is interesting to see that this tradition of satire is still reflected in memes based on scenes from the show. This form of satire is visible in this section where ISF uses satire to criticize government spending. In Figure 29, Mr. Burns, who made a film to serve his own elitist interests, represents the Irish government. In Figure 30, Ned Flanders represents the Irish citizens voicing their frustrations at the Irish government, which is represented by the people of Springfield. Figure 31 shows the absurdity of the Irish government spending money on a water rafting centre and a giant printer. Humour and satire have always been a part of politics, but with the rise of online communities like ISF, anyone can express their views in a satirical way. Memes created by groups like ISF are an alternative to traditional political humour (cartoons and television) as anyone can create a meme and share it with others, creating a sense of belonging in a group. Sharing or liking a meme can also help it reach a wider audience and inspire others to create their own versions (Kulkarni, 2017). Media featuring political satire conveys political messages and people who consume this type of media tend to engage in more political discussions and participate in political activities. People who find the messages in this type of media funny are more likely to absorb the messages being portrayed, which can increase their persuasive power by reducing counterarguments or scrutiny (Zhang & Gearhart, 2022). As a platform for political satire, ISF is a significant source for political news that can spark younger Irish people's interest in politics and encourage them to engage with political information. Memes made by communities like ISF are designed to encourage others to join in discussing critical social and political issues. (Zhang & Gearhart, 2022). This is evident through the number of likes, reactions and comments seen on the posts in Figures 29-31. This democratization of satire in a group like ISF has the potential to be a powerful force for social change, challenging dominant narratives and amplifying marginalized voices (Dynel & Poppi, 2021). In summary, ISF provides a space for members to express their dissatisfaction with decisions of government. Through political humour, ISF exposes absurdities of government decisions and provide a space for criticism outside of the mainstream media. The engagement and interactions generated by ISF memes indicate that other members of

the community relate to or agree with the messages conveyed. These memes reflect the frustrations and concerns of Irish citizens, and especially young people, who feel unheard by the government as a result ISF provides a platform for the Irish people to voice their opinions and hold those in power accountable.

3.3 - Topic 2 – Bashing Tans - Anti British sentiment on ISF.

Context and Meme Examples

The relationship between Ireland and Britain has a long and complicated history due to the legacy of British colonialism in Ireland. Despite the progress that has been made over the years, anti-British sentiment in Ireland still exists today (Bielenberg, 2020) and is evident in ISF. In the group, anti-British sentiment is known as “Tan Bashing”, a synonym of brit-bashing. The word “Tan” is a slang word used to describe a British person and comes from the name Black and Tans who were members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, a police force in Ireland when the country was still under British rule (BBC, 2020). In ISF, it is common to use the word Tan when talking about a person from Britain and is frequently used when discussing British politics or Irish and British relations.



Figure 32 - Tan Bashing meme example 1

In Figure 32, we see a scene from “King of the Hill” episode twenty-three of season nine, where Homer aims to get fit. He attempts to go for a run while it is still night and comes across a gym called “The All Night Gym”. However, Homer does not know what

a gym is, saying “Gyme? What's a Gyme?” pronouncing it as "gyme" (rhymes with rhyme). This scene was posted as a meme on ISF, where the producer mentions “Here’s one for every fellow Yank (American) when they first join ISF”. It is important to mention that while members of ISF are predominantly Irish or from Ireland, there are members on the page who are other nationalities who may have joined due the popularity of the page, or they are huge fans of The Simpsons. The “Gyme” scene is used to illustrate the meaning of the word Tan, as someone new to group may not know what it means. Instead of asking – “what’s a gym?” Homer says, “a Tan?”, “Ohhh a Tan” and as he walks in we see a juxtaposition of images including the British flag, a Simpsons caricature of Prince (now king) Charles and a picture of Margaret Thatcher in the background. In the comment section, we see another image from a member that says, “And about 24 hours later...” with an image of an angry mob in front of the Simpsons home with the text “Let’s bash some Tans!”. Meaning that after 24 hours of joining the group, new members should understand and adopt the anti-British sentiment of the group.



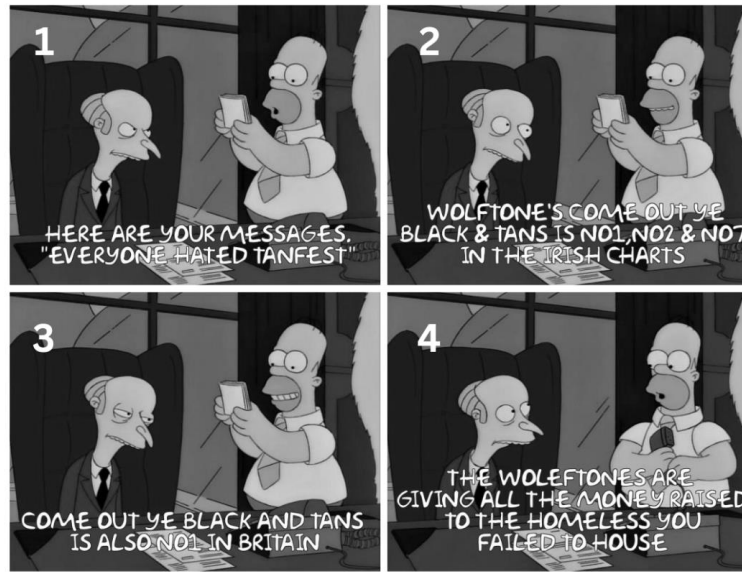
Figure 33 - Tan Bashing meme example 2

In recent years, Brexit has played a role in exacerbating tensions between the two countries and has arguably reignited anti-British on the island of Ireland. The decision by the UK to leave the European Union created significant economic and political uncertainty and has threatened to undermine the progress made by the Good Friday Agreement (Mullally, 2019). Brexit concerns were prevalent on ISF as members posted updates on Brexit developments through Simpson memes. Additionally, members of ISF used memes to mock Brexit leave voters for not understanding the consequences of the UK leaving the EU. In Figure 33, we see a tweet from a Brexit Leave voter named Colin Browning who complained about waiting 55 minutes in an immigration queue at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport (Browning, 2020). The United Kingdom officially left the European Union in January 2020, which meant that British citizens would have to use the 'Other nationalities' border check queue when travelling to EU countries (Bryant, 2020). The tweet received thousands of reactions from users ridiculing Browning, whom like many Brexit leave voters did not take into account the consequences of the UK leaving the EU as one user commented "You've got what you voted for, enjoy!" (Browning, 2020). The image beside the tweet shows an unnamed male Simpsons character who appears in "Deep Space Homer" episode fifteen of season five. In the scene, Homer is sitting on the couch in his living room, picking up the TV remote control he says "Ah, TV respects me. It laughs with me, not at me!" when he turns on the television, we see a man on the screen pointing to the viewer (Homer) and laughing uncontrollably while saying "Ha, ha, you stupid" showing that the TV is laughing at Homer. In the meme posted on ISF the original line from the laughing man is changed to "You stupid Tan", where the producer is laughing at the Brexit leave voter on Twitter. Over the last decade, (2012-2022) there has been a series of events to mark the establishment of the Irish Republic.

Some events within this Decade of Centenaries have led to public controversy and debate about Ireland's political and cultural relationship with the UK (Bielenberg, 2020). In January 2020, the Irish Government announced plans for an event to honour those who served in the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) as part of the Decade of Centenaries and was planned to take place in Dublin Castle on January 17th, 2020, (McGreevy, 2020). However, plans for the commemoration were condemned by the public and politicians who expressed their intention to boycott the event (Kinsella, 2020). Plans to memorialise the Royal Irish Constabulary was described as disrespectful

to the memory of Irish people who lost their lives for Irish independence (Quinn, 2020). While some saw the commemoration as a way to honour the contributions of those who served in the police forces, others criticised the Irish government of attempting to “whitewash” the history of the Royal Irish Constabulary, famously nicknamed the Black and Tans who were working under orders of those in British rule and committed heinous acts against Irish citizens (BBC, 2020) such as the suppression of Irish separatists, those who attempted to challenge the status quo like trade unionists, Irish language activists and suffragettes. (Óg Ó Ruairc, 2020). They supervised the eviction of thousands of impoverished Irish citizens from their homes leaving them destitute on the roads or inside the workhouse, brutalised and murdered workers in Dublin during the 1913 Lockout, identified those to be executed after the 1916 Easter Rising (Quinn, 2020) and killed civilians at Croke Park on Bloody Sunday, 1920 (Kinsella, 2019). The Irish government later cancelled the event following widespread protests and criticism with the hashtag #blackandtans trending online (McAuliffe, 2020) and the Irish rebel song “Come Out Ye Black and Tans” by Wolfe Tones reached No. 1 in the Irish and UK music charts. Originally released in 1972, the song denounces the British police force of mostly former soldiers recruited to the Royal Irish Constabulary in Ireland following the 1916 Easter Rising (Coney, 2020) Responding on Twitter, the Wolfe Tones said: “Come Out Ye Black n Tans No. 1 in Ireland...Fine Gael got their answer” and announced proceeds will go to a homeless charity (Thomas, 2020). The backlash against the RIC commemoration reflected the deep divisions and sensitivities that still exist around the legacy of British colonialism and the struggle for Irish independence (McAuliffe, 2020).

January 9 at 8:29 PM
Office of An Taoiseach: 8am Friday 10th



2.7K

90 Comments 116 Shares

Figure 34 - Tan Bashing meme example 3

The RIC commemoration was a big topic of discussion on ISF in January 2020 as users posted hundreds of memes criticising the planned event. In Figure 34 we see a scene from the episode titled “Homer the Smithers” episode seventeen of season seven (1996). In the episode, Mr Burns assistant Waylon Smithers takes a well-deserved holiday but in order to make sure his job at the plant safe, he hires Homer as his temporary replacement while he is away. Homer takes care of Burns by catering to his every whim including making breakfast and answering his work telephone calls. In the above scene, Homer is giving Burns his phone messages, with each one getting worse. Homer: Here are your messages: "You have 30 minutes to move your car," "You have 10 minutes," "Your car has been impounded," "Your car has been crushed into a cube," "You have 30 minutes to move your cube.". On the Ireland Simpsons Fans this scene was posted as a four-panel meme in the same style as the original scene however, rewritten to fit the news about the Royal Irish Constabulary commemoration. Along with the original post, the poster titled it “Office of An Taoiseach: 8am Friday 10th” at the time of posting Leo Varadkar was still the Taoiseach and he was one of the Irish politicians who has for a commemoration honouring the RIC. In this scenario, Mr Burns represents the standing

Taoiseach at that time Leo Varadkar and Homer is Varadkar's assistant reading out his messages. The messages Homer gives Burns relate to the reactions to the news of the planned RIC commemoration, where Burns/Varadkar becomes more surprised with each message.

Discussion

Tan Bashing in ISF is a form of postcolonial humour, a type of comedy that emerged in the wake of colonialism and the subsequent struggles for independence of postcolonial countries. It is a genre of humour that explores the tensions and contradictions of the colonial experience and its aftermath, and it often uses irony, satire, and parody to challenge dominant narratives and power structures (Willems, 2011). It is also a form of cultural resistance referring to the act of utilizing symbols and meanings, which is culture, to challenge and oppose a dominant authority, frequently resulting in the creation of an alternate perspective of the world and history. Postcolonial theory views cultural resistance as a product of hybridization, where colonized individuals adapt the tools of their oppressors to dismantle their power (Lawan, et al., 2018). Postcolonial humour serves as a tool for subverting dominant discourses and exposing the hypocrisies of colonial and postcolonial societies. Postcolonial satire is a response to colonial amnesia (denial of a colonial past) and explores the aftermath and effects of colonialism in everyday life. Balce proposes that postcolonial humour is a way of examining historical wounds through humour rather than just focusing on traumas of the past – this is apparent in the structures of anti-British sentiment communicated within the meme culture on ISF (Balce, 2016). Additionally, postcolonial humour is used to critique colonialism and its legacies, challenge dominant power structures and engage in acts of resistance (Willems, 2011). As evident in Figure 34, ISF criticizes the Irish government's plans to hold an event honouring the RIC. This meme represents an act of resistance to not only challenge the dominant power structure of the Irish government but also criticizes the legacy of Ireland's colonial past and the extent to which this past has been overcome. Humour in memes is a means of building community and self-identity by differentiating "in-groups" and "out-groups." Stereotyping is a component of humour, and jokes about outsiders can overlap structures of exclusion, such as colonialism. Additionally, humour reinforces social and political hierarchy, where laughter can take the form of schadenfreude, referring to

taking pleasure in the misfortune of others and represents the sound of victory over those being laughed at. This is evident in Figure 33, where ISF use memes to laugh at the misfortune of the British and the failings of the UK government in the aftermath of leaving the EU. Humour and satire contain elements of irony which is a rhetorical device that is often used in memes to create humour, convey a message, or make a point. Irony involves the use of words or expressions that convey the opposite of their literal meaning or the incongruity between what is expected and what actually happens (Davis, et al., 2016). Irony involves two participants: the person who intends to use irony and the person who is supposed to understand it. Sometimes the irony is hidden from some people who are not meant to understand it. The person using irony tries to create a relationship with the person interpreting it and they arrive at the same conclusion about the message being conveyed (Hutcheon, 1995). For example, in the context of ISF when a meme mentions, “Tan Bashing” or as seen in the image posted in the comments of Figure 32 “Let’s bash some tans!” does not actually mean the members want to go out and attack the British, it’s a form of irony through satirical humour that nonetheless establishes a critical divide between Irish and British culture. Language and culture are important aspects of humour, especially within a community like ISF. Those who understand the joke belong to the cultural group, while those who don't are not part of the group. These jokes are often used to belittle and mock others' shortcomings, particularly when a social identity is threatened. In Figure 32, if an outsider (someone not part of ISF) were to see this meme for the first time, they would not understand the joke. However, if you were already a member of ISF and understood the context and humour the producer is attempting to portray, you would get it. Earlier we discussed how collective identities are vital for group solidarity as they define the boundaries of who belongs and does not belong in a certain group (Leap & Thompson, 2018).

Collective identity is evident in ISF as members share memes featuring humour that other ISF members should understand and appreciate. Humour can have both unifying and divisive effects, as it can create a bond among those who understand it but also exclude and ostracize those who do not (Ó Conchubhair, 2016). This is evident in the Tan Bashing memes discussed in this section, as ISF use this type of meme to create a bond with others who understand Ireland’s colonial past and at the same time if someone does not understand the joke then they are not part of the in group. In summary, the findings in this section show that “Tan Bashing” connects members of ISF

through a shared understanding of Ireland's colonial past. Through the use of postcolonial humour, satire, and irony, the group members are able to connect with others who share a similar collective identity. It is indicated that members of ISF believe that it is important to remember Ireland's past and the country's struggle for independence, and the memes posted provide a sense of participation and acceptance. In this way, the group promotes a sense of belonging and friendship among its members. The use of memes to discuss and confront sensitive issues, such as Ireland's colonial past, can be seen as a form of political and cultural resistance. By using humour and satire, the group is able to engage in political discourse in a way that is accessible to a wider audience. The use of humour is an effective tool for breaking down barriers and building solidarity among those who share similar experiences. The “Tan Bashing” memes are used in a way to address the complex history and ongoing relationship between the two countries. By using postcolonial humour, the group is able to address issues that may be uncomfortable or controversial in a way that is both entertaining and informative particularly for its young members. For example, one of the issues frequently discussed in “Tan Bashing” memes was Brexit, which was a catalyst for the recent surge in anti-British sentiment in the group (Vice, 2019, BuzzFeed, 2019). ISF use memes as a way to reject Brexit’s nostalgia for empire which idealizes Britain's colonial past, longing for global power, control over colonies, and belief in exceptionalism (Koeglara, et al., 2020). Overall, the use of memes by ISF serves to create a sense of community and belonging among members. Through the use of postcolonial humour and satire, the group is able to address sensitive issues and promote political discourse that is engaging and accessible.

3.4 - Topic 3 - The 2020 Irish General Election

Context and Meme Examples

The 2020 General Election in Ireland was a historic event that saw a significant shift in the political landscape of the country. Held on February 8th, 2020, the election was marked by a surge in support for left-wing and progressive parties, as well as a decline in the popularity of traditional centre-right parties such as Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. The most significant of these was Sinn Féin, which had been polling strongly in the lead-up to the election. The party's success was due in part to its ability to tap into public frustration with the two main political parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, and was also due to its focus on issues such as housing, health, and climate change, which resonated with younger voters in particular (Carroll, 2020). Meanwhile, Leo Varadkar leader for Fine Gael attempted to frame the election around his Brexit diplomacy and economic policies. This gave Sinn Féin the chance to present itself as the party that would bring about real change (Ryan, 2020).

The election was called after the collapse of the minority government led by Fine Gael, which had been propped up by a confidence-and-supply agreement with Fianna Fáil. The election campaign was dominated by issues such as healthcare, housing, and climate change, with voters expressing frustration with the government's perceived failure to address these issues adequately (Gallagher, et al., 2021). The election saw a record number of candidates standing, with a total of 531 candidates contesting 160 seats across 39 constituencies (McConnell, 2020). The election also marked first time that voting was held on a Saturday, in an effort to boost voter turnout (Claire McGing, 2020).

In the run-up to the election, opinion polls showed a surge in support for left-wing parties such as Sinn Féin and the Green Party, while support for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil appeared to be waning (Leahy, 2020). Sinn Féin, in particular, enjoyed a significant boost in popularity, with its leader, Mary Lou McDonald, campaigning on a platform of social justice and economic reform (Ryan & O'Connell, 2020). During the 2020 Irish general election, the Ireland Simpsons Fans (ISF), Facebook group encouraged members to use their vote in the upcoming election. Members created a series of posts and memes that emphasized the importance of voting and encouraged other members to

get involved in the election. The group also shared information on how to register to vote, where to find polling stations, how to vote by post and other important information. In Figure 35, we see a meme from one member outlining information on how to change your address before the election. The scene comes from the episode “Secrets of a Successful Marriage”, episode twenty-two of season five (1994). In the episode Homer decides to become a teacher at an adult education centre to teach a class on "secrets of a successful marriage". While walking around the centre, Homer looks into a classroom where local bar owner Moe Szyslak, is teaching "Funk Dancing for Self-Defense", a class on how to defend oneself with dances moves. Speaking to the class Moe says “Alright, here's the 411 folks. Say some "gangsta" is dissing your fly girl. Yah just give 'em one of these!” and then proceeds to do some break dancing and then grabs a shotgun and fires several times. This meme known as “Give 'Em One of These!” is a popular Simpsons among fans online. In the meme posted to ISF, instead of a gun, Moe is holding a copy of a RFA3 form, the poster included a link to download the form if any needed it in the post text.



Figure 35 - Government elections meme example 1

In Figure 36, we see a meme posted on ISF the day before the election. The top picture is a screen shot of Homer and Marge in front of their home with Homer saying “Marge get my pencil” and below an image of the election voter ballot. The top picture is from the episode “Marge gets a job” episode seven of season four where Marge has to get a job after some expensive house repairs. In the scene, Marge pays the repair man while a disgruntled Homer (due to the cost of the repairs) tells the repair man to leave. While the repair man tries to give them repair advice Homer says “Marge get my gun”. This scene was used in a meme to remind members to vote tomorrow mentioning that this is the first time voting is held on a Saturday to facilitate students and working families. The poster also reminds members to fill the ballot all the way to the bottom in order for their vote to count.



Figure 36 - Government elections meme example 2

Additionally, many posts on ISF before the general election advocated for people to vote for left wing parties. In terms of political views, ISF takes a left-leaning stance. The group has been vocal in its criticism of the policies of Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, Ireland's two traditional main parties who occupy the centre-right of the political spectrum. Coming up to the election, there were many posts where members encouraged votes for left wing parties such as Sinn Fein. In Figure 37, we see a meme from one poster where they mention their father, who is in their sixties, has decided to vote for Sinn Fein instead of Fine Gael or Fianna Fail. In the meme we see the Sinn Fein logo over a character named Milhouse Van Houten who is standing in a flooded room and cheering “Everything is coming up Sinn Fein!”. The scene is from the episode “Mom and Pop Art” from episode nineteen of season ten (1999). In the episode Homer becomes a contemporary artist after a disastrous attempt to build a barbeque in his backyard. At the end of the episode, Springfield becomes flooded after Homer attempts a new art project. In the scene, we see Milhouse in his room complaining about having to wear flood pants, he then opens his bedroom door and the room becomes flooded. Milhouse is overjoyed that the flood pants are working as his feet are soaked but the cuffs of the pants are bone dry and cheerfully says “Everything is coming up Milhouse!”. This scene is another one of the popular ones used in memes by fans online

and is often used to show optimism or victory. In the show, Milhouse always gets the bad end of the stick, however he still remains optimistic (VanHooke, 2022). As the scene shows, even during the bad times you can still find victory in the small things. The meme posted to ISF shows that the poster is optimistic about their father who has decided to vote for Sinn Fein.



Figure 37 - Government elections meme example 3

In recent years, there has been a surge of support for left-wing parties in Ireland, driven by frustration with issues such as housing affordability, rising living costs, and climate change inaction. Sinn Fein has been the main beneficiary of this trend, with the party positioning itself as an alternative to the status quo. Additionally, it is important to note that while ISF is left leaning in the political spectrum, not all the posts coming up to the 2020 Irish general election were in support of Sinn Fein. There were of course people who were planning to vote for parties like Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, however ISF moderators had to turn off the comments or delete the post if the debate became too

heated. While there were plenty of posts encouraging votes for Sinn Fein, most of the election posts encouraged members to vote for anyone except for Fine Gael or Fianna Fail. In Figure 38, we see a scene from the episode "Homer and Apu" episode thirteen of Season five (1994). Where local supermarket worker Apu loses his job at the Kwik-E-Mart after selling Homer expired meat. Feeling guilty, Homer lets unemployed Apu live with him and his family a while Apu tries to get his job back. While staying with the Simpsons, Apu does chores around the house because he believes that by doing so, he will be able to repay Homer for selling him spoiled food. While there, Apu starts singing "Who Needs the Kwik-E-Mart?" about how he does not miss the Kwik-E Mart (later the family see Apu crying on the roof because he does miss the Kwik-E Mart). Throughout the song, there is a running gag where Grandpa Simpson keeps falling over because Apu takes his cane or his chair.



Figure 38 - Government elections meme example 4

The meme emphasises the importance of not voting for FG/FF, where Grandpa Simpsons representing the youth of Ireland trying to sit on a chair, the chair represents “Any chance of owning their own home”. Apu is replaced by a smiling Varadkar who quickly pulls away the chair with his cane, resulting in Grandpa falling over. The post was accompanied by the tagline - “For the love of god don’t vote Fine Gael/Fail”. The meme references the disproportionate impact of austerity policies on the youth of Ireland following the economic crash. Between 2008 and 2012, youth unemployment increased from 4.8% to 14.2%, making it more difficult for them to find steady employment. Furthermore, the lack of employment opportunities has made housing a significant expense for young people. Consequently, young people have struggled to achieve financial independence, increasing the likelihood of emigration. (van Lanen, 2021). The results of the election led to a fragmented political landscape, with no party winning an outright majority. Fine Gael, led by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, had been in power since 2011 and was seeking a third consecutive term in office. However, the party suffered a significant loss of support, winning just 20.9% of the first preference votes and 35 seats in the Dáil (lower house of parliament), down from 50 seats in the previous election. Fianna Fáil, led by Micheál Martin, also suffered losses, winning 22.1% of the first preference votes and 38 seats, down from 44 seats in the previous election. The biggest winners of the election were Sinn Féin, who saw a surge in support, winning 24.5% of the first preference votes and 37 seats, up from 23 seats in the previous election. This was a significant achievement for the party, which had been shunned by the political establishment for many years due to its association with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Sinn Féin's policies on housing, healthcare, and the economy were seen as resonating with voters, particularly younger voters, who were disillusioned with the traditional parties. Another significant winner in the election was the Green Party, which won 7.1% of the first preference votes and 12 seats, up from 2 seats in the previous election. The party's focus on environmental issues, such as climate change and sustainable development, had clearly struck a chord with voters, and it was seen as a key player in any potential coalition government. The election also saw a significant increase in the number of independent candidates, with 21 being elected to the Dáil, up from 19 in the previous election. This was seen as a reflection of the growing disillusionment with the traditional parties, as well as a desire for more local representation (Carroll, 2020).

In the aftermath of the election, there was much speculation about who would form the next government. With no party winning sufficient seats to form a government, there was a period of political uncertainty, with no clear path to a government being formed (Carswell, 2020). Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil had ruled out working with Sinn Féin, citing concerns about the party's historic links to the IRA and its economic policies, while Sinn Féin had ruled out working with either of the traditional parties. After weeks of negotiations, a historic three-party coalition government was formed in June 2020, comprising of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Green Party. This was the first time that the two traditional parties had formed a government together, and it was also the first time that the Green Party had been part of a coalition government in Ireland. The new government was led by Fianna Fáil's Micheál Martin, with Fine Gael's Leo Varadkar serving as Tánaiste and the Green Party's Eamon Ryan as Minister for Climate Action, Communication Networks and Transport (Bray, et al., 2020). The formation of the three-party coalition government was a historic moment in Irish politics, and the new government faced significant challenges in its first year in office, particularly with the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. Despite these challenges, the government was able to make progress on key issues such as welfare and healthcare, and the election marked a shift in the political landscape of the country, with smaller parties and independents gaining more support (Little, 2020).

Discussion

The act of participating in politics is considered to be a fundamental aspect of a democratic society. Political participation is seen as a means for citizens to influence different levels of government and is critical to the functioning of democracy (Tran, 2021). The memes shown in Figures 35-38 demonstrate the significance of political participation within a group like ISF. The memes shared in ISF serve as a means for individuals to engage in political discussions, share information about voting and the importance of participation in the political process. ISF serves as a platform that can shape cultural perceptions of how political participation should be carried out (Huntington, 2017). The use of alternative forms of political activities by younger generations is becoming more prevalent in recent years, with social media platforms providing a participatory space for personal engagement and sharing their views. This is evident in Figures 35-38 as ISF utilized memes to encourage political participation and

to persuade members to vote for a particular political party. Sharing political content in a community like ISF, has allowed users to engage with political issues through affective politics and connective action. The use of social media during elections for political purposes has increased, with memes being used as a tool for communication among young adults who may not otherwise be interested in politics.

Political memes posted in groups like ISF are easily digestible and culturally familiar, acting as a fast food of information that complements public discourses (Denisova, 2019). They can also serve as a quick source of political information that can lead to offline discussions, ultimately affecting users' political views and voting behaviour (Nazeer & Ashfaq, 2023). Given the size of the ISF Facebook group and the regularity of the posting of memes in relation to political issues, it is well positioned to make an impact on the decision-making processes of members. When individuals share or create memes that align with their political beliefs, it can signal an invitation for discussion or serve as a label for their beliefs (Hatfield, 2018). Internet memes can serve as powerful tools of political advocacy, community building, consciousness raising, and peer persuasion. ISF memes can help supporters define themselves and form communal identities while actively promoting their chosen political candidate or delegitimize other candidates through mockery and ridicule. The social bonding dynamics of ISF can have political significance, inspire political participation and build a sense of citizenship and political efficacy among its members (Penney, 2019). Since the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity, Irish politics has seen significant social change reflected in electoral politics and social movements. The dominant parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, have experienced a decline in vote share to less than 45%, with Sinn Féin gaining more votes among under 35s and those who cited housing as the number one issue (Müller & Regan, 2021).

Access to housing has increasingly influenced Irish politics, with high levels of market income inequalities and a large low-wage sector indicating a polarized labour market. Irish voters are increasingly self-identifying as centre-left, with lower-earning voters more likely to identify on the left and higher-earning voters on the right. Women, young people, and those with a university degree are more likely to identify on the left, while older and more religious voters are more likely to identify on the right (Müller & Regan, 2021). The surge in support for left-leaning Sinn Féin during the 2020 general

elections in Ireland surprised many. This support for Sinn Féin was evident in Figure 37 where the producer shares a story about a family member deciding to vote for the left-leaning party. The younger generation were one of the driving forces behind the swing to the left during the 2020 Irish general election, with Sinn Féin receiving strong support from voters aged 18-35. Young voters are dissatisfied with the status quo of increasing rent, precarious employment, homelessness, and underfunded public services, and are using the ballot box to call for change (McGill, 2020). This is illustrated in Figure 38, where the producer reminds members not to vote for Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil because they believe that having these parties in government is diminishing the chances of Irish youth owning a home. The youth of Ireland have become more politically informed and place importance on issues that directly affect them. Despite criticisms, young people are standing firm in their support of left-wing political parties. They believe that the left is prioritizing the needs of the people over neoliberal ideologies (McGill, 2020). ISF plays a crucial role as a platform for members to access political information, express their concerns about politics, and connect with like-minded individuals who share the desire for societal change in Ireland. In recent years more people are turning to the internet to make decisions, including who to vote for. In the 2020 general election in Ireland, younger voters were drawn to emerging online sources. Social media, in particular, played a significant role in informing young people on election matters (O'Connell, 2020). As evident in Figure 35 and 38, ISF played an important role in encouraging young people to use their vote during the 2020 Irish general election.

Through the use of memes, ISF were able to make politics more accessible and engaging for a generation that may not have been interested before and are less likely to engage with political messaging available through traditional media outlets like TV and newspapers. By emphasizing the importance of progressive policies and encouraging members to vote for left-leaning parties, ISF helped to shift the political landscape in Ireland and encourage young people to get involved in shaping their country's future. Additionally, the political influence of ISF has been noticed by Irish politicians and world media. In May 2019, Hazel Chu, a member of the Green Party was elected as Dublin City's first councillor with over double the necessary votes in Pembroke. Chu extended her gratitude to Ireland Simpsons Fans for supporting her with the memes created around her campaign and believed they had contributed to around half of her

vote (Kelly, 2019) The group has also been featured in various media outlets, both in Ireland and abroad, especially on the groups takes on Brexit which has helped to increase the group's visibility and influence (Vice, 2019, BuzzFeed, 2019). In September 2019, Ireland Simpsons Fans created a political party called The ISF Party. More than 800 people became members on the ISF party within 24 hours. The party's philosophy is expressed as "progressive, critical, and a bit direct" and is in support of an inclusive and united Ireland (Horgan-Jones, 2019). However, it was later announced that the political party was an inside joke that got too much media attention and they wouldn't be running any candidates in the 2020 Irish general election. In a statement released by the ISF party, they aimed to keep the spirit of "sound politics" alive on social media and tell politicians not to undermine the impact of online communities (Kinsella, 2020).

In summary, the memes shown in this section indicate the importance of political participation during elections. The findings also show a strong support for left-leaning parties, while criticizing the domination of Irish politics by the two main centre-right parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. ISF's political stance is a reflection of the interests of its group members, who express a desire for better representation for left-leaning political views, and as well for a government to address issues within the country. ISF memes are an effective tool for engaging with complex political issues and mobilizing support, especially among younger generations who may not be as engaged in traditional forms of political discourse. Through their use of memes, ISF has helped to create a new type of political discourse in Ireland and encourage political participation among young people in particular, who often feel disenfranchised by traditional political institutions. By using memes to discuss Irish politics, ISF has helped to make politics more relatable, entertaining, and engaging for a wider audience.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Internet memes have emerged as a powerful tool for political participation and engagement in the digital age. They provide a platform for individuals to express their opinions on political issues and engage in political participation. Unlike traditional forms of political communication, memes are easily shareable and have the potential to reach a large audience, often leading to increased engagement and participation. The use of memes in political discourse has been observed across a wide range of social media platforms. Memes provide a way for individuals to communicate complex political issues in a concise and accessible manner, making them an effective tool for younger audiences who may not be as engaged in traditional forms of political discourse. In addition, memes can provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. Online communities, like ISF provide a space for individuals who may not have access to traditional political institutions or may not feel represented by mainstream media to engage in political discourse. This can lead to a more diverse range of political opinions and perspectives being expressed, leading to a more robust and inclusive political landscape (Milner, 2016). ISF has become an important platform for political discourse and political participation in Ireland, where members use humour and satire to express their views. The group has become known for its humorous and irreverent take on Irish politics, and its members have been praised for their ability to engage with complex political issues in a way that is accessible and engaging for a wider audience (Hanratty, 2019).

The aim of this study was to answer the following question - To what extent do internet memes contribute to Irish political discourse. This thesis has highlighted that memes have a substantial impact on Irish political discourse, playing a crucial role in shaping public opinion and engaging individuals in political discussions. The analysis of memes posted by members of ISF has revealed the many ways in which these memes are used to critique government decisions, discuss sensitive issues, and mobilize political participation during elections. The research has shown that memes are not just a form of entertainment, but a powerful tool for political expression and social commentary. The findings of this research indicate that online meme communities like ISF have the potential to shape social and political attitude formation in the public sphere. By providing a space for people to engage in issues that affect their daily lives through a shared identity, these groups promote a sense of community and belonging among their

members. The accessibility and level of camaraderie identified in the group dynamics make memes effective in shaping social and political attitudes, and this has been demonstrated in the influence that ISF has had on shaping political discourse in Ireland. The use of memes to ridicule politicians and criticize government decisions is a reflection of the frustrations and concerns of ordinary citizens who feel that their voices are not being heard by those in power. ISF serves as a platform for people to voice their opinions and hold those in power accountable. This can lead to real change in society, highlighting the importance of political discourse through humorous user-generated content. In addition, the use of postcolonial humour and irony in discussions of Ireland's colonial past, as seen in the "Tan Bashing" memes, is particularly noteworthy. The memes posted on this topic promote a sense of cultural resistance and remind people of the country's struggle for independence. They also serve to build solidarity among those who share similar experiences and to promote a sense of belonging among group members. The research has also shown that memes can be used to encourage political participation, particularly among younger generations who may not be as engaged in traditional forms of political discourse. By using memes, ISF has helped to make politics more relatable, entertaining and engaging for Irish audiences. The memes posted during the 2020 Irish general election demonstrate how effective they can be in mobilizing support for left-leaning parties, critiquing the political establishment and sharing information on the voting process. While ISF is mainly a group for fun and humour, its influence in politics should not be underestimated. The group has become an important platform for political discourse and political participation in Ireland, and its members have become an influential voice in shaping public opinion and political decision-making. The use of internet memes in political discourse in Ireland is a rapidly growing phenomenon and ISF's ability to engage with complex political issues has made it an important force in Irish politics, and its influence is likely to continue to grow in the years to come. While the use of humour and satire may seem light-hearted, the messages conveyed through these memes reflect the frustrations and concerns of ordinary citizens who feel that their voices are not being heard by those in power. The constant stream of daily humour and criticism eventually leads to a narrative of government incompetency. The researcher recommends further exploration of the effects of memes on Ireland's political landscape and society. It would be interesting to investigate the influence of memes on voting behaviour. As younger generations

become increasingly disenchanted with traditional political institutions, memes may provide an important avenue for political engagement and participation. Further research is needed to fully understand the potential of memes in shaping political discourse and participation in Ireland.

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