AN UNLIMITED MEMEIOSIS
OF THE "LET'S GO FUCK JOE BRANDON" MEME:
SOCIOCULTURAL RAMIFICATIONS OF TABOO HUMOR
IN STRATEGIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE

ANTHONY DION MITZEL
UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA

anthonydion.mitzel@unibo.it

Abstract: This article focuses on the intersection of meme theory, taboo humor, and political discourse, using the "Let's Go Brandon!" meme and meme cycle as a case study for examining humor in contemporary political discourse and tribalism in the United States. It shows how memes – in the expanded sense – distill complex political ideas into easily shareable content, influencing public opinion and political engagement. The analysis considers the use of taboo language and humor, such as the use of "fuck," as a form of rebellious use of profanity that challenges societal norms of civility in public engagement. By analyzing the role of memes and the cultural artefacts generated from them in political communication, this study provides insights into the evolution of political discourse and the sociocultural impact of memetic humor in the digital age.

Keywords: culture; humor; memes; politics; taboo.

1. Introduction

Political tribalism is far from a new phenomenon in the sociocultural and discursive landscape of the United States of America. In fact, it can be considered part of the origin story of the country itself since the 1790s with the formation of Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Party and Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's Democratic-Republican party. Both parties had very different visions and opposing views of how the country's future should be (Hofstadter 1969; Aldrich 2011). Yet, the concept of political tribalism as we know it today – intense loyalty to a political party often over national or common interests – has intensified over the last few decades, mainly through the amplification of views and opinions through mass communication and fully integrated social media applications. Once again, political tribes are still vying for their vision of the future, but now in a new digital frontier (Ishrat 2023).

In their own unique way, political commentators, pundits, presidents and congress people all the way down to that salt-of-the-earth average Joe Six-packs[1] employ nostalgia when articulating the way things used to be. So, it should be of no surprise to anyone paying the minimum of attention that the charged political rhetoric of the real or "prime" world would shift into the digital or "virtual/composite" world, and then back again. In these past couple of years, even before people began to return to life in this new post-Covid world, the political climate in the US became even more fraught with angst than it already was (Munger 2019). Due to this situation and the tense tribalism (Levendusky 2010; Chua 2018) or "political sectarianism" (Finkel *et al.* 2020) in the US, the right-wing slogan "Let's Go Brandon!" (LGB) achieved criticality as a memetic event. This meme then became embedded and incorporated into various pre-existing meme templates, while morphing into material objects as cultural artifacts in the public domain.

The significance of memes in contemporary political discourse is their ability to distill complex ideas into easily digestible and shareable content. Like candidate-focused image macros – i.e., digital images with text parsed onto them, posters and lawn signs, either mass produced or bespoke – memes have become a powerful tool for mass and vernacular communication (Miltner 2014), allowing individuals to express their views, critique and lambast political figures, and engage in online activism including forms of "hacktivism" (George and Leidner 2019). Moreover, memes often serve as a mirror of the prevailing sociocultural and political climate (Algaba and Bellido-Perez 2019; Wiggins 2019), reflecting public opinion (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Young 2018; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023), social attitudes, emerging cultural landscapes, revealing and unraveling the often-esoteric dynamics of power. In an era dominated by social media and digital communication, memes have emerged as a democratizing force, enabling grassroots movements (Shifman 2014a; 2014b) and marginalized voices to participate in sociocultural and political dialogue on a global scale

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[1] A term used to denote a regular or "everyman" voter in U.S. political discourse. Often characterized as a blue-collar, predominantly working-class member, the term is an allusion to the average American voter who drinks a six pack of beer daily, beer being the alcoholic drink of choice in the Unites States.

(Szablewicz 2014; Yoon 2016; Nee and De Maio 2019; Wiggins 2019). As such, understanding the role of memes in contemporary intertextual multimodal mass and vernacular communication is fundamental for grasping the multipolarity and complexities of public opinion, the subtleties of political engagement, and the evolution of political ideologies in the digital age.

In the realm of memes, taboo humor, and political discourse, the 2016 presidential race serves as a watershed moment in the history of memetics, where the power of memes was fully realized. Donald Trump, despite being a flawed candidate, clearly benefited from the meme advantage. Trump's right-wing supporters created a challenging digital environment or memetic battlefield for Hillary Clinton, which can be said marked the beginning of the "Great Meme War" – part of a larger ongoing "culture war" in US society. More often than not, the discourse was unkind, derogatory, and based on different forms of transgressive humor which characterize said culture war.

Taboo humor often involves making jokes about controversial or sensitive topics that are typically considered off-limits in polite conversation, in the media, or within the realm of digital jokes (Attardo 2001; Bucaria and Barra 2016; Chiaro 2018). The LGB meme cycle emerged and was utilized as a way for some people to mock and criticize President Joe Biden, particularly his handling of certain political issues, such as – but not limited to – Biden's age and mental stability, the US economy and inflation, global military conflicts like the one in the Ukraine-Russian war (Mejova *et al.* 2022; Bilaniuk 2023) and the currently unfolding tragedy in Gaza and Israel (Massa and Anzera 2022). Many memes can be seen as a form of taboo humor, as they involve the use of euphemisms to express negative feelings about a public figure providing a form of releasing tension. Both taboo humor and the "Let's Go Brandon" meme cycle push boundaries and challenge societal norms around acceptable forms of expression. Coupled with the breaking of taboo forms of language, political humor serves to critique authorities while preserving a veil of ambiguity, creating a seemingly innocuous setting. This approach allows for the highlighting of flaws and mistakes in a manner that appears non-threatening by using ridiculing devices (Kuipers and Raskin 2008; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023).

Case in point is the use of derogatory language to push a political position or support partisan narratives. The word "fuck" is considered taboo in many English-speaking cultures and societies due to its vulgar and offensive nature, and its use in memes can be seen as controversial and potentially offensive. Kulick and Willson (2003), for example, examine the ways in which taboo language, such as the word "fuck", is used in different cultural contexts and how it can be seen as a form of social control or rebellion. Rebellion is the optimal word to describe the MAGA movement and many of the more fervent adherents to both the ideology and Trump himself. One example that preceded the genesis of the meme was the Jan 6th riots and attack on the US Capitol. This event was a glaring example and further proof of narratives that have the potential to create memetic fervor in the public (see section 2.5.2.).

In the political sphere, using the word "fuck" to criticize a sitting president can be seen as taboo mainly because it violates societal norms of impoliteness and is a face threatening act (Culpepper 2010; 2011) around civil discourse, as

the term is widely recognized as profane and undignified. Since civility is expected in public discourse, employing such language is viewed as a breach of the respect typically afforded to the office, reflecting poorly on both the speaker and the perceived decorum of the political environment. The use of "fuck" in memes, known for its offensive and vulgar connotations, is especially controversial and can be deemed inappropriate by various audiences (Locher 2015; Merritt *et al.* 2021).

This article takes a global view of the iterations and permutations of memes – in the expanded sense – generated from the "Let's Go Brandon! Fuck Joe Biden" (LGB-FJB) meme and will provide ancillary context from the sociocultural dimensions of contemporary humor in political discourse.

2. LGB-FJB "Criticality"

Moving on to the memetic event that happened on October 2, 2021, NASCAR driver Brandon Brown's victory at the Sparks 300 race at the Talladega Superspeedway inadvertently sparked the emergence of the "Let's Go Brandon" (LGB) meme cycle, i.e., a permutation of mutually assisting memes working together to ensure their survival. During a televised interview with Brown after his victory, sports reporter Kelli Stavast misinterpreted crowd chants of "Fuck Joe Biden" as "Let's Go Brandon", erroneously assuming it was a cheer for Brown. But in order to fully understand the conditions that created the meme, we must quickly go back to an event that took place about a month prior to the main memetic criticality, that is the bonding of narratives that go on to produce memes that achieve virality. "Criticality" is used here to denote the exact moment of a meme's genesis, whether it begins in isolation or bonded with a preexisting meme. Due to the nature of digital content, we are now able to track and log the precise moment a meme achieves the aforementioned criticality.

In terms of precursor memes, there is evidence that the chain of words "Fuck Joe Biden" anchored in the expletive "fuck" was floating around the right-wing collective conscience which then entered the memeiosphere, i.e., the sum totality of possible memes available to users in the public discourse. In August and into September of 2021, chants could be heard around various American football stadiums in the US (Hookstead 2021). In terms of a novel meme (LBG) bonding with another pretexting meme (FJB), the precursor to the genesis of the LGB-FLB memeplex was a Trump rally held on September 11th during which the former president witnessed the crowd spontaneously break out into a chorus of "We Want Trump". This impromptu chorus then devolved into chants of "Fuck Joe Biden" followed by clapping and repetition. But at that time, the meme "Let's Go Biden" with its coded meaning had not yet achieved criticality nor initiated memeiosis.

Here we have one facet of the inception stage (see section 2.5.) of the FJB-LGB meme cycle: the chant "Fuck Joe Biden" as precursor meme. This disconnect between what was being said and what was reported created a phenomenon where the phrase "Let's Go Brandon" became a coded, more publicly acceptable substitute for the direct profanity aimed at President Joe Biden. The taboo nature

of this language lies in its dual function: as a euphemism for profanity (Allan and Burridge 1991), the phrase serves as a stand-in for a vulgar statement, allowing it to be used in public and in the media where direct profanity would be inappropriate or censored. In terms of political dissent, it also represents a form of political expression, encapsulating dissatisfaction with the president in a manner that skirts overt disrespect or censorship. This indirect approach enabled the phrase to become popular in settings that typically enforce decorum, such as television and online platforms, where outright swearing could be subject to penalties. This occurrence illustrates the strategic use of language to uphold an appearance of decency while still delivering a message that would be seen as taboo or offensive if stated explicitly.

Returning to the main criticality on October 2, 2021, this misinterpretation of the NASCAR crowd chanting quickly went viral, leading to the creation of the "Let's Go Brandon" meme[2], a tongue-in-cheek dig at the sitting US President. This gaffe and subsequent misunderstanding of a chant showcasing the taboo word "fuck" directed at the sitting US president quickly circulated on social media and became a viral sensation. People seized on the meme as a euphemism for expressing anti-Biden sentiment and general discontent with the administration, thus creating a subversive and humorous way to critique the president. The meme's emergence demonstrates how simple incidents can trigger meme creation initiating memeiosis, especially in the context of political discourse and online culture. Due to its popularity, this meme has become a "kernel" or core attribute of informational content that has many nodes orbiting around it. While there are infinite permutations of nodal combinations, there can only be one kernel. Moreover, it shows that memes are random, spontaneous acts generated by homo sapiens – often without any rhyme or reason – sticking to the collective conscience of users (Garin 2015). Furthermore, this meme gained traction as a coded slur against US President Biden morphing into a symbol of anti-Biden sentiment and multimodal political extremism (Alizadeh *et al.* 2019) both in online discourse (virtual or composite world) and at political rallies (prime world).

2.5. The Role of Memeiosis in the Creation and Propagation of Memes

Before moving on to the concept of memeiosis – the continuous and infinite propagation of memes – it is essential to understand the theoretical foundation of memes themselves. Richard Dawkins initially introduced the concept of the meme in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), establishing it in the public consciousness as a cultural unit "analogous to a gene" that spreads from person to person, much like a virus. While Dawkins, as a sort of memetic "patient zero" or vector of the idea, laid the groundwork, contemporary scholars have expanded on his idea of a cultural metaphor, articulating new dimensions of memes and ensuring the concept remains relevant. In the context of internet memes as a new form of humor (Attardo 2023), Varis and Blommaert's (2015) observation that memes function as multimodal signs where texts and images work in synthesis is

[2] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lets-go-brandon.

particularly pertinent in today's digital space, a world steeped in digital content and awash with devices that transmit and receive them. Blommaert (2015) argues that "an object of study, which, by exactly such attempts, is bound to remain unstable and subject to perpetual upgrading and reformulation" (ibid: introduction). Though not expressly referencing memes, Blommaert's inference applies nonetheless to the study of them. Taking this into consideration, memes have open, indeterminate meanings, but index (connote) "cool", therefore using a meme is by its very nature cool. Users are motivated to share a meme in order to align themselves with the meaning it represents through association (Attardo and Mitzel 2020). Diverging from Dawkins's focus on memes as abstract ideas, research now tends to focus on memes as digital artifacts, i.e., texts, images and video (Lee 2020). This idea is further supported by the theory of multimodality (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001), which emphasizes the diverse ways memes can communicate meaning in today's digitally saturated world through diverse modalities. The visibility, recognizability, ease of creation, and the multimodal nature of memes contribute significantly to their widespread visibility (Huntington 2013) and impact (Börzsei 2013).

Shifman suggests that memes can shape and spread "socially constructed public discourse" (2014a: 4), acting as powerful tools for communication and cultural exchange, but may not be taken seriously. As semi-ephemeral objects, these compact, highly interactive digital artifacts generate substantial interaction, making them rich subjects for analysis and interpretation while also reflecting society's "deep social and cultural structures and can reveal the hidden ideologies rooted within them" (Aslan 2021: 49).

Since now anything has the potential to become a meme (Zenner and Geeraerts 2018), for a meme to achieve viral status, it must undergo various stages in its potentially infinite lifespan, first beginning with meme production or "memeiosis" (Mitzel 2021: 235; 2024; Attardo 2020; 2023: 24-25), much like a joke cycle which can be extended to the meme cycle, i.e., the life cycle of a meme (Attardo 2023: 111-114). Understanding memes also requires recognizing the intertextual references they contain; as Tsakona (2020: 3) notes, it "presupposes the recognition and understanding of implicit or explicit intertextual references", which is crucial for comprehending their full meaning and significance (Laineste and Voolaid 2017). These considerations, alongside sociocultural factors, are vital when analyzing and interpreting the "Let's Go Brandon" memeplex.

Memes undergo several distinct phases in their lifecycle (Tyler 2011; Bjarneskans *et al.* n.d.; Truszkowski *et al.* 2020; Mitzel 2024), which, for our purposes here can be categorized as follows[3]:

1. Inception: The creation or initial appearance of the meme.
2. Diffusion: The widespread sharing and transmission of the meme across various platforms and populations.

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[3] While there is much diversity in how the meme cycle is articulated in memetic terminology, I have defined them as such based on the meme cycle model applied to the memes and memeiosis of *The Godfather* texts (Mitzel 2024).

3. Modification: Alterations and variations are made to the meme, enhancing its appeal or adapting it to different contexts.
4. Declination: A decrease in the meme's popularity and frequency of use.
5. Dormancy: The meme remains latent within the "memeiosphere", ready to be revived or repurposed.

Once a meme has declined and ceased spreading, it stays dormant within the meme pool, waiting for an opportunity to be reintroduced in a new form. The concept of the meme pool refers to the collection of memes available within a particular culture or community. The meme pool acts as a reservoir from which new memes can emerge and old memes can be revived or repurposed based on shifts in cultural context, social media trends, or external events that resonate with the themes or sentiments expressed in the memes. The meme pool thus serves as a dynamic archive of the creative and communicative expressions within a discourse community.

Like a virus, internet memes are not fully removed from the memeiosphere. A meme can be reactivated by catalysts such as holidays, election cycles, or relevant current events, which can bring them back into active circulation. While there is an infinite number of templates and permutations to list here, some of the most pervasive contemporary memes are "Woman Yelling at Cat/Smudge the Cat"[4], "Doge the dog"[5], and the right-wing favorite, "Pepe the Frog"[6]. In the realm of internet culture and digital communication, memes have become a ubiquitous form of expression, often spreading virally across online platforms. Central to the study of memes is the concept of memeiosis. Memeiosis in its basic sense, is the production of memes (Mitzel 2021; Attardo 2023). This term is an extension of "semiosis" (Lotman 2001; Lotman and Clark 2005) and works as an analogy to meiosis, i.e., the creation and splitting of cells. It is the process by which memes proliferate and evolve through the transmission and reinterpretation of cultural symbols and ideas. Cultural semiotic theory (ibid), rooted in the study of signs and their interpretation within cultural systems, provides a framework for understanding how memes function as units of cultural transmission.

2.5.1. Crossing the Osmetic Boundary

An important idea to consider is the crossing of what can be called the "osmetic boundary", the permeable divide between the online and physical worlds we increasingly inhabit, which is itself an extension of the biological concept of osmosis, i.e., a fundamental concept in biology and a process by which water molecules move across a semipermeable membrane from an area of lower solute concentration to an area of higher solute concentration. When memes are created, they can cross this osmetic boundary, manifesting as tangible, semi-ephemeral objects. Common examples include T-shirts, flags, and other material

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[4] Smudge the Cat https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/smudge-the-cat, Woman Yelling at a Cat https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/woman-yelling-at-a-cat.
[5] Doge https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doge.
[6] Pepe the Frog https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog.

goods that either modify existing items or introduce entirely new ones, embedding the meme into the physical world as cultural artifacts. For instance, consider the case of conservative commentator Ben Shapiro: on October 5th of 2021, Shapiro's "The Daily Wire", a conservative right-wing website that creates online journalistic content, podcasts, and other multimedia, began selling T-shirts featuring different variations of designs with the LGB-FJB meme phrase. This illustrates how a meme, initially just a semi-ephemeral idea circulating online, crosses the osmetic boundary and enters the "prime" world that humans physically occupy. Naturally, in a capitalist society, it was not long before people began capitalizing on the meme, turning it into a marketable product. The phrase's commercialization added another layer of taboo, as it involved profiting from a phrase that originated as an insult. This commercialization of the LGB-FLB meme by *The Daily Mail* can be seen as trivializing political discourse and reducing complex issues into simple, marketable slogans.

2.5.2. Memetic Fervor and the Totememe

This brings us to the concept of what we might call "memetic fervor". When a meme reaches a critical mass and achieves virality, it can take on a life of its own within a group or society (Milner 2013). At this point, the group may align around a shared mission to engage with and propagate their new "totem" – a concept inspired by Durkheim's (1912/1995) idea of a totem in collective rituals (Greenwald 1973; Olaveson 2001; Stephenson 2015) – which we can term the "totememe". A totememe in the memetic sphere holds significant discursive power (Wiggins 2019), both for the group as a whole and for individual members. This power enables individuals to spread the original totememe through various multimodal channels, including images, text, video, other digital formats and the artifacts of material culture, thus creating a sense of agency for those who share it. Modern communication devices can amplify a totememe, allowing it to reach wider audiences and reinforcing its presence within the group. Through this process, the totememe becomes more than just a meme; it evolves into a powerful symbol that unifies the group and shapes their collective identity. Spread memetically, the fervor surrounding the totememe drives its continued proliferation and ensures its proliferation within the cultural discourse.

3. Right-wing humor and "Owning the Libs"

This section will discuss the interaction between humor and sociocultural factors that have led to the current and tense political environment which marks contemporary political discourse. Though the following can be applied to most cultures within the Anglosphere, for our purposes here, we shall focus on how these concepts work and play out in the United States of America.

Right-wing humor (RWH) has come to encompass humorous content that aligns with conservative, right-leaning or traditionalist ideologies (Sienkiewicz and Marx 2021). At times it lambastes left, liberal or progressive viewpoints

often including government intrusion and overreach, political correctness, identity politics, and more contemporary concepts like "wokeness" and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Generally speaking, there is no doubt a vast spectrum in individuals' tastes in humor and their perception of it (Brown *et al.* 2019). Conservative or right-wing political perspectives are often linked to a strong emphasis on tradition, social order, respect for authority, power, achievement, and conformity in contrast to left-wing humor, whose orientations have been linked to values such as social justice, equality, universalism, self-direction, and benevolence (Kfrerer *et al.* 2021). Just like all forms of humorous interplay, RWH uses satire, sarcasm, irony, and stereotypes to convey its messages, resonating with audiences who share similar political and sociocultural beliefs (Kulkarni 2017). When utilized by the right, RWH targets liberal ideas, institutions, or individuals, often sparking debates around sensitive topics while appealing to those who identify with right-leaning or far/extreme right perspectives. Moreover, what is of particular interest are the discourses generated by public participation (Milner 2013) or events, and the semi-ephemeral artifacts and materialities generated from said discourses. These include, for example, memes and how they take on a life of their own outside of the digital space, acting as realia-based rallying cries for those that align with right-wing ideologies (see section 2.5.1.). At times, these outward displays of support for former president Donald Trump and the MAGA (Make American Great Again, a meme in and of itself as well) movement in general, take on a carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1981; 1984a; Kibler 1970) quality that is more about show and shaking things up and less about substance.

One discursive strategy that RWH employs is called "Own the Libs", a phrase and tactic used predominantly in US political discourse, often attached to conservative or right-leaning individuals, to describe actions or statements made primarily to provoke, irritate, or frustrate liberals ("the libs"). The term implies that the primary goal is not necessarily to advance an argument or policy but to elicit or "trigger" a strong, often emotional reaction from those on the left. This control of the conversation through victimization can move the discursive advantage to the utterer of the insult, allowing them to claim that they are in fact the aggrieved party. A form of "trolling" (Binns 2012; Bishop 2014; Lieback 2019), the concept gained prominence in the second decade of the 21st century, particularly on social media and in the rhetoric of certain conservative commentators and politicians, which frequently led to conflicts in the public sphere (Chiaro *et al.* 2022; Kuipers and Zijp 2024). It often involves trolling, mockery, or adopting positions perceived as antagonistic to liberal values and priorities. It can be argued that this approach can trivialize serious political issues and foster divisiveness. Due to this tension, the tactic of "owning" encapsulates a political strategy that prioritizes causing frustration or emotional reactions from political opponents over policy debates or constructive dialogue at the detriment of political discourse, thereby adding to the deep political polarization taking place in the United States at the current moment. Often manifesting in memes, tweets, podcasts, public protests and stunts designed to highlight perceived liberal hypocrisy or to challenge liberal values in a provocative manner, "Owning the Libs" has become commonplace in US political

and sociocultural discourse both online and in-person (Peters 2020; Hartley 2023).

With regards to political partisanship, "Let's Go Brandon" was widely adopted by conservatives and critics of Biden as a way to voice their opposition without resorting to outright profanity (Huntington 2020). It became a memetic rallying cry for those dissatisfied with Biden's policies, leadership, economy, and general state of the Union. Due to political polarization, this phrase deepened the political divide, as it was seen as emblematic of the disdain held by certain groups towards the President.

Pundits now amplify certain memes and memetic events for internet credibility. Users of the "Owning the Libs" strategy emphasize and expand upon culture war issues intended to be divisive to provoke a reaction in others, such as not standing or kneeling for the flag, insufficient patriotism, wokeness, and Critical Race Theory (CRT). One notable example was the former president's son, Donald Trump Jr.'s use of RWH to mock[7] the president and help spread the LGB meme to his millions of followers. The digital realm is saturated with these interactions. In fact, on October 6, 2021, Donald Trump Jr. shared a meme on Instagram depicting Donald Trump with a pink hat that read "Let's Go Brandon". This post quickly garnered over 328,000 likes in just two days. For many on the left or those who support Biden, Donald Trump Jr.'s post represented a crude and disrespectful form of political discourse, exacerbating tensions between opposing factions and once again breaking the taboo for respect and reverence for a leader (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Interestingly, the "Let's Go Brandon" phrase, intended to covertly insult President Biden, did not significantly trigger liberal outrage as expected. Instead, the liberal response to the "Let's Go Brandon" meme sparked a new wave of memes from liberals, who mocked conservatives for their subtlety in avoiding the explicit phrase "Fuck Joe Biden". In fact, one interesting development was the emergence of the "Dark Brandon"[8] meme cycle as a counter move to the LGB-FJB meme cycle. This permutation served as a response in a form of memetic warfare, at times even supported and used by the Biden administration. "Dark Brandon" counters the LGB-FGB narrative and flips the script on it. It portrays Biden as a powerful, almost superhero figure, using imagery and themes typically associated with strong and confident leadership. Aesthetically, the memes often feature stylized graphics of Biden with glowing red eyes like those of the main villain Homelander from *The Boys* television show (2019-), glowing eyes being a main feature of powerful characters in diverse multimodal media such as comics, video games, film and television. The general aesthetic is over the top and mocks the serious, gloomy disposition and general outlook Biden's opponents often have toward him, his administration and the current state of the Union.

The relationship between the two competing meme cycles demonstrates the polarizing nature of contemporary political discourse in the US and the dynamic

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[7] However, this mocking is not limited to one side of the political spectrum: it is common across the board, with all parties engaging in ridicule (Gruner 1997; Kuipers 2006) as a form of aggression (Kuipers and Raskin 2008) and disparagement humor (Ferguson and Ford 2008 not in references; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023).

[8] Dark Brandon, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/dark-brandon.

ability of users to engage in the political conversation through advances in technology. The interaction between the two meme cycles shows how memes can evolve and be appropriated by different groups for opposing purposes and can reflect and amplify the political and cultural variations and divisions in society. While LGB is used to ridicule and undermine Biden, "Dark Brandon" emerged and was used by his supporters as a humorous and uplifting counter memetic reclamation of the narrative. This reclamation worked by turning criticism on its head by transforming perceived weakness and senility into exaggerated strength and vitality. This response was also a shift towards positive humor and satire over anger, downplaying and countering the taboo language anchored in euphemism or the outright use of "fuck", perhaps reflecting a preference among some voters for a return to more traditional political discourse devoid of the shallowness of constant triggering, ridicule, negativity and general chaos that was a hallmark of the Trump administration.

3.1. Parasocial relationships

This section explores the sociocultural dynamics of how humans engage with memetic discourses emerging from public events, like the Sparks 300 NASCAR event, and then form affinity groups both online and in-person based on the totememe (see section 2.5.2.). These groups create a false sense of familiarity and intimacy with public figures when in reality they have no connection to them. Feeling this affinity can perhaps authorize people to engage in activities and discourse they would not otherwise engage in.

The concept of parasocial interactions (Horton and Wohl 1956) was introduced well before the arrival of social media, yet it is still applicable to humans as social creatures that have reproduced the same modes of communication in the digital space. This laid the groundwork for understanding how audiences develop relationships with media personalities, not through direct interaction but through the medium itself. More recently, Bond (2016: 657) described parasocial relationships as "social bonds audiences develop with media personae". With the rise of social media, these virtual interactions have increasingly supplanted real-world interactions. Due to this unmooring of discourse from human face-to-face interactions and the consequences that come with it, the anonymity and distance provided by online platforms decrease accountability, allowing for more aggressive and often negative interactions that would be considered "taboo", such as provoking people with insults and/or harsh language. This lack of accountability encourages a more gratuitous use of language and, by extension, facilitates forms of aggressive humor. Modern technology such as the smartphone enables unprecedented access to public figures. Fans and supporters can now potentially interact with celebrities directly through social media platforms, bypassing traditional barriers like physical security or geographical distance. This ease of access can intensify the emotional highs associated with celebrity interactions but also highlights the darker aspects of human behavior online. Moreover, the ease of tracking public figures, such as through flight status apps, raises serious privacy and ethical concerns. Notably, Elon Musk has taken legal action against Jack Sweeney, the operator of the

Twitter account @ElonJet, which tracked Musk's private jet using publicly available flight data. This illustrates the tension between public interest and individual privacy rights in the digital age. Musk argued that sharing this information posed security risks, particularly to his family. This incident has sparked debates about privacy, public information, and the limits of free speech on social media platforms (Wendling and Evans 2024).

3.2. Group Cohesion Through Meme Culture

Sociological studies on culture often point to rituals and traditions as mechanisms for fostering communing affiliation. These practices create a shared history and collective memory that reinforce group identity and solidarity (Durkheim 1912/1995). In organizational studies and internet research, communing affiliation is seen in the context of culture, where shared values, beliefs, and practices bind members together, enhancing loyalty and cooperation (Schein 1985). "Communing affiliation" (Zappavigna and Martin 2018) is a concept that refers to the emotional and social bonds that form within a group, enhancing members' sense of belonging and shared identity. This term is often used in the context of religious or spiritual communities, but it can also apply to any group where members feel a strong connection, mutual support, or "align" with certain ideas and values increasingly in digital spaces such as X/former Twitter (Zappavigna 2012). It refers to the process by which individuals or groups form and maintain connections and a sense of unity through shared experiences, beliefs, or activities. Communing affiliation is often assessed in the realms of sociology, psychology, and organizational and internet studies to understand how people build social bonds and create a sense of belonging within communities or organizations. Zappavigna and Martin (2018) explore this concept, which they define as a form of alignment through "social tagging" (2012) that can paradoxically facilitate both solidarity and antagonism in the online space. They focus on how individuals who have never met use tagging to forge connections and negotiate meanings, framing it as a type of parasocial interaction that can have both positive and negative outcomes.

Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive a part of their identity and thus create meaning from the social groups to which they belong or adhere, even if it is a loose and fleeting affiliation (Tajfel 1974; 1979; 1982; Tajfel and Billic 1974). Through shared norms aligning around the "Let's Go Brandon" meme, their perceived values as conservatives or MAGA adherents, and activities such as political rallies, members of a group develop a sense of "we-ness" or communal identity (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Moreover, memes provide a form of group cohesion that has in many ways been lost in American society. Research in group dynamics and psychology emphasizes the importance of cohesion in maintaining group affiliation. Cohesion can be fostered through regular interaction, shared goals, and collective experiences, leading to stronger communal bonds (Festinger *et al.* 1950) whether they be online or in-person. Memes now act as a social glue bonding people together, even if the bonds are highly contextual and short-termed.

In a synthesis of a plenary lecture at the 17th International Pragmatics Conference in Padua, Italy (27 June-2 July 2021), David Beard spoke about George Orwell's 1984 and the "Two Minute Hate" sessions in which the citizens of Oceania partake in a daily ritual to express hostility towards the Party's enemies. Beard (2021: 8) recounts that "Orwell saw clearly that the power of propaganda rests not in what it describes, but in how it takes hold of people, and forms them into a mass with collective behaviors and emotions". Beard then quotes Orwell who wrote "the horrible thing about the Two Minute Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in" (1949: 12-15). This ritual served to control and unify the population while allowing them to release emotions in a controlled albeit chaotic manner. Much the same can be said for people that engage in the "Let's Go Brandon-Fuck Joe Biden" chant in public spaces. It offers those who choose to engage a chance to loudly voice their opposition to not only Biden, but the administration that he heads. Moreover, some of the more fervent propagators of the meme go so far as sporting clothing such as hats and t-shirts as well as brandishing flags with the meme emblazoned on it at their residence or even on their personal vehicles for all to see.

As we find ourselves inundated with digital content, it is apparent that many people, particularly those experiencing various forms of isolation worldwide, have strengthened these parasocial affiliations. This phenomenon underscores how digital interactions can intensify feelings of connection in an increasingly atomized citizenry and fragmented, algorithmically shaped (Zuboff 2019), and increasingly interconnected world.

4. Conclusion

In the "Let's Go Brandon-Fuck Joe Biden" meme cycle, we can observe the right-wing tactic of "Owning the Libs" as well as explanatory ideas anchored in parasocial interactions, oscillating within the orbits of humor and taboo. The LGB-FJB meme's emergence demonstrates how simple incidents of miscommunication can trigger meme creation with their rapid spread and influence shaping political discourse. Through the use of taboo language with the word "fuck" as a central textual element, this memetic event also demonstrates the organic weaponization of memes by the general public, giving citizens a voice outside of mainstream media discourse. Couched in taboo humor, for good or bad, memes now carry a cultural gravity that has the potential to shape how people feel about situations fostering emotions in their own right (Guadagno et al. 2013). Moreover, due to parasocial relationships, communing affiliation, social identity and group cohesion through meme culture, memes now give the public both horizontal and decentralized influence, thus becoming a form of political activism, especially in the context of political discourse and online culture. The incident highlights the randomness and power of miscommunication that sees the rapid spread of memes shaping contemporary political discourse in the 21st century, further desensitizing people to crude language and a lack of public decorum in political discourse – a trend that will

no doubt continue into the foreseeable future. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that we understand the cultural and political context surrounding a meme's emergence, how it is used by various sections of the citizenry, and the ways it is transformed and propagated in society. The LGB-FJB meme is a crucial example because it sheds light on the implications and significance of memes within contemporary discourse. The meme's origin coincided with a charged political climate in the United States, marked by polarization and contentious debates on any and all issues in US American society. Therefore, it can be said that memes can now serve to forecast and assess sociopolitical climates and that analyzing the cultural and political context of memes and the memetic events that encompass them can help better comprehend why the meme resonated with certain groups and how it reflected broader sentiments and tensions within society.

Moving forward, further research can be done on taboo memes and their role in political discourse as a way of swaying and ascertaining public opinion. Due to the chaotic and random nature of memetic discourse in the public sphere, there will always be narratives, material culture and situations to be studied. More recent examples would be that just during the writing of this article two momentous events took place that demonstrate the difficulty, value, and relevance of this type of contemporary research in applied culturology and memetics. The first was the assassination attempt on former President and current Republican candidate for President, Donald J. Trump, and the second is the current US President Joseph R. Biden's announcing that he will not, in fact, seek reelection as President. These two events have in some ways made the LGB-FJB memeplex moot and interrupted the meme cycle rendering it essentially obsolete or "uncool" (Attardo and Mitzel 2020). On the other hand, the memeplex will continue to exist in the memeiosphere, albeit in a state of dormancy, waiting to be possibly re-used at some later time. As we see the possibility of a Kamala Harris presidential bid, and with the selection of Minnesota Governor Tim Walz (an emerging memetic event at the time of writing), a new meme cycle has emerged with Harris appearing as a hero icon and Trump as the villain, once again utilizing the metaphor and pervasive narrative of Good vs Evil (Karpman 1968; expanded on by de Saint Laurent *et al.* 2021) in political discourse. Of further memetic interest is the choosing of current Ohio senator J.D. Vance as Trump's running mate and the meme cycles that have been generated from the choice of Vance as VP. While it is much too early to tell, we should also pay attention to who has the memetic or "meme advantage" (see Introduction) in political races, as memes can have both a positive and detrimental effect on election outcomes.

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