



## **Memes, Viral Content, and Digital Stories Constructing Political Narratives and Mobilization**

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### **Abstract**

The research explores how memes, viral content, and digital stories construct political narratives and drive public opinion in the digital age, especially for their impact as political communication and activism tools. As observed, viral memes and digital stories played a crucial role in shaping public sentiment during the 2022 presidential election, where they were used to both support and criticize candidates, influencing voter perceptions and engagement. Despite this significant role, there is a gap in research concerning how these digital forms of content specifically construct political narratives and their effectiveness in mobilizing political action. This study examined how memes, viral content, and digital stories contribute to political narratives and mobilization. While literature on the subject often discusses the general effect of digital media on politics, it rarely covers the specific mechanisms through which memes and viral content shape or influence political narratives and mobilization. It, therefore, uses a qualitative methodology through thematic and content analyses of secondary data such as social media posts, viral memes, and digital stories that assess their role in shaping political discourse and mobilizing public opinion. Indeed, findings indicate that memes and viral content effectively create and spread political narrative framing

by simplifying complex issues, arousing user emotions, and encouraging users to spread content virally; such practices may then contribute to the political mobilization of the public and influence electoral outcomes. This report concludes that these powerful digital tools for political communication often have temporary effects and are vulnerable to misinformation. These include formulating strategies that critically engage in digital content and developing media literacy to help reduce misinformation. This research is important to political analysts, media practitioners, and digital strategists because it offers insights into changing dimensions of political communication and the effects of digital media on mass mobilization.

**Keywords:** Memes, viral content, digital stories, political narratives, public mobilization, thematic analysis, content analysis

## Introduction

Nowadays, living in the digital present, memes, viral content, and digital storytelling have more and more functioned as powerful levers through which political narratives are produced and individuals mobilized across borders. These emergent modes of digital communication framed by their humor, brevity, and shareability are continuously shaping political discourses in ways that traditional media often struggle to match. At the same time, political actors, activists, and ordinary citizens take advantage of the viral qualities of digital content to create a way of communicating political messages, constructing narratives, and mobilizing action. The speed and scope of digital content have fundamentally reshaped the terms of political mobilization by lowering barriers to grassroots movement-building and complicating government control over political narratives. Accordingly, this requires an understanding of how memes and viral content are part of political storytelling and mobilization to unpack the contemporary political landscape.<sup>1</sup>

The literature on digital political communication has grown in leaps and bounds over recent years, with scholars analyzing the role of

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<sup>1</sup> Limor Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*. (London: MIT Press, 2014), 1-3, 9-15.

See also, Tim Highfield. *Social Media and Everyday Politics*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

social media in shaping political engagement and activism. Research has discussed how memes act as forms of digital shorthand, transforming complex political ideas into more palpable, shareable formats.<sup>2</sup> Other studies have investigated how viral content feeds into political movements; notable examples include the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and more recently, climate change activism.<sup>3</sup> While these studies are indeed valuable in revealing the mechanics of digital mobilization, there are still some gaps in understanding the active ways in which memes and viral content construct political narratives. Yet, most current research has emphasized the effectiveness of digital content in spreading political messages rather than how such messages are framed, transformed, and interpreted by different audiences through digital storytelling.

Furthermore, the rise in memes, viral content, and digital stories has transformed how political stories are created and proliferated; most of such occurrences and how they impact political mobilization have not been unpacked as yet. Whereas such messages do have immense potential for inspiring and informing mass-level involvement, there is skepticism on how they shape political beliefs and build public opinion or induce any collective action. Thus, this research sought to examine the role of these digital tools in shaping political narratives and their ability to mobilize people for political causes. This study, therefore, tried to answer the following questions: How are memes and viral content used in constructing and disseminating political narratives? How do digital stories create and foster political identities and group solidarities? What is the role of virality in sustaining or transforming political movements in digital environments?

The paper thus sought to fill this gap by examining how memes, viral content, and digital stories are used in constructing political narratives that underpin mobilization. It examined how digital creators frame political issues, construct identities, and mobilize communities through the unique affordances of digital platforms. The importance of this research includes the fact that it fixes its attention on the level of narrative construction, beyond the mechanics of virality toward a deeper way in which political stories are told, retold, and

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<sup>2</sup> Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 119-126.

<sup>3</sup> Zeynep Tufekci. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. (London: Yale University Press, 2017), ix-xx.

reshaped in digital spaces. In this regard, based on the narrative dimension alone, this research can offer fuller insight into how political ideas gain credence and influence collective action during the digital age. In addition, in the fruition of the study, the paper integrates thematic and content analysis of secondary data sources; namely, social media posts, memes going viral, and digital stories. This process opened avenues for detailed analyses regarding exactly how memes, digital information diffusion processes, and various other digital storytelling constructs politically oriented narratives that effectively cause the emergence of different mass mobilizations. It analyzes the themes and patterns of the content shared during major political events, such as the presidential election, to show the emotional and rhetorical strategies that underpin engagement and the shaping of public opinion. The thematic analysis allowed for the identification of the motifs and messages recurring in the digital content, while content analysis gave insight into the frequency, virality, and context of the memes and stories. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the mechanism through which digital content shapes political discourse and mobilization, and it was further complemented by critical engagement with the existing literature on media and politics.

It is expected to make immense contributions to the fields of digital media studies, political communication, and social movement theory. This study may unpack how contemporary political narratives are crafted, circulated, and contested in the digital space. Its findings could provide important insights for political actors, activists, and policymakers in comprehending the dynamics of digital political engagement. Furthermore, it might encourage the understanding of how digital storytelling develops political identities and solidarities in a constantly fragmented media landscape and fill an important gap in existing literature through the comprehensive treatment it offers of how memes, viral content, and other digital stories are shaping political narratives of mobilization with implications for political communication and collective action.

## **Memes and Viral Content as Political Narratives**

The term meme was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), as something that spreads throughout a culture. In

recent years, the Internet has allowed content to spread rapidly from person to person, creating a media environment suitable for the creation of Internet memes. Memes often consist of unusual images in square format, often accompanied by poorly picked fonts and colors, that make a certain audience chuckle. Memes can also be videos with odd images mixed with funny background music or voice-overs that do not match. The virality or speed of the spread of internet memes is what distinguishes them from other internet languages. With only one click, memes may be spread and are attention-getters. They are easily replicable with basic mobile applications. A picture can be viewed by several people at once and contrasted with other aspects. However, this leaves the entire scene up to interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

The way memes are being used in popular cultural and media studies may mislead one into thinking that they are a phenomenon limited to the internet which is simply not true. Obviously, we cannot understand political processes and arrangements through memes and social activities alone, the role of memes is to provide popular perceptions and judgments of issues and forces lurking behind invisible boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Memes are units of cultural transmission that spread through imitation, in the same way as genes in biological evolution.<sup>6</sup> They can be ideas, tunes, or behaviors that replicate and propagate from mind to mind. Memes are subject to mutation and natural selection, just like genetic phenomena.<sup>7</sup>

The memetic domain, which researches memes, does not have an integrated language to explore the variations of conceptualizations; thus, several diagrammatic representations were presented for the expression of various kinds of memes.<sup>8</sup> Other current investigations in

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<sup>4</sup> Dominic Wells. "You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking." *Journal of Political Science Education*, 14(2) (2018): 240-248. available from <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2017.1406363>

<sup>5</sup> Putra, F.D., et. al. "Memes as a Symbol of Political Communication." *Channel Jurnal Komunikasi* Vol. 10, 1 (2022): 85-98. available from <https://doi.org/10.12928/channel.v10i1.22326>.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Jan. "Meme Hunting with the Humdrum Toolkit: Principles, Problems and Prospects." *Computer Music Journals* 28 no. 4 (2004): 68-84. available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3681692>.

<sup>7</sup> John Ball. "Memes as Replicators." *Ethology and Sociobiology* 5 no. 3 (1984): 145-161. available from [https://doi.org/10.1016/0162-3095\(84\)90020-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0162-3095(84)90020-7).

<sup>8</sup> Sabah Al-Fedaghi. "Computer Science Approach to Information-Like Artifacts as Exemplified by Memes." *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and*

the scientific literature made several findings concerning memes, based on a simple connection occurring between frequency of occurrence and propagation over citation networks. This pattern can be formalized and validated using large-scale publication data, providing an effective method for identifying memes without relying on linguistic or ontological knowledge or arbitrary thresholds.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, viral content, in turn, is defined as digital content that spreads widely across the internet networks to reach an enormous audience in a short period. According to the researchers, emotive content is a driver of virality, with positive content usually being more viral than negative.<sup>10</sup> However, the relationship between emotion and virality is complex, as high-arousal emotions, both positive (e.g., awe) and negative (e.g., anger, anxiety), tend to increase content sharing. Conversely, low-arousal emotions like sadness decrease virality. Other factors contributing to virality include how surprising, interesting, or practically useful the content is.<sup>11</sup> The study of viral content on different online platforms established nine major categories, which were media, entertainment, celebrity, domestic, empathy, jokes, everyday life, cause, and politics. Being able to understand such factors allows for the proper crafting of a viral marketing campaign to work.<sup>12</sup>

It can be deduced that political memes and viral content use some common motifs, including us versus them dichotomies, emotional appeals, and humor, especially satire and irony. These

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*Applications* 6 no. 10 (2015): 233-240. available from DOI:10.14569/IJACSA.2015.061032.

<sup>9</sup> Tobias Kuhn, et.al., "Inheritance Patterns in Citation Networks Reveal Scientific Memes." *Physical Review X* 4. available from <https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevX.4.041036>.

<sup>10</sup> Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman. "What Makes Online Content Viral?" *Journal of Marketing Research* 49 2 (2012):192-205. available from <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353>.

<sup>11</sup> Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman. "Emotion and Virality: What Makes Online Content Go Viral?" *Marketing Intelligence Review* 5 no. 1 (2013): 18-23. available from <https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/gfkmir-2014-0022>

<sup>12</sup> Greta Dermendjieva and Rositsa Slavova. "Online Sharing Platforms as a Medium for the Emergence of Viral Content." *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences* Vol. 4 no. 2 (2018): 177-199. available from <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.177199>.

Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman. *Emotion and Virality: What Makes Online Content Go Viral?* 22.

elements simplify complex political issues, making them more digestible for wide audiences. Memes often focus on current events, engaging people with political issues even if only for the sake of humor. Much like political cartoons, they can catch the attention of a reader in a way that an article cannot. Framing political issues in a binary way-pitting one group against another creates a narrative that is easy to understand and emotionally engaging. These are narratives many times reflecting larger political ideologies simplified into meme format for easy consumption. It is noticed through content analysis that such-themed memes are not only shared more but have a more sustained engagement, too. This virality is closely linked to emotional resonance; memes that induce anger, pride, or humor tend to be shared widely, and thus play a significant role in the dissemination of political narratives. Memes for and against candidates in the 2022 Philippine presidential election have passed between supporters and opponents across partisan lines, illustrating, in particular, the power of digital artifacts in shaping public perception and debate. Although, candidate poking fun at themselves or their rival is not new to Philippine politics. However, with the advent of memes, this strategy has been leveled up to match the increase in social media platforms.

In addition, a confluence of technological developments, sociocultural practices, and philosophical and theoretical assertions in our everyday lives makes it possible for anyone in the global communications network to become the target of viral media. Not just people and their private lives are impacted by this circumstance. Rather, the same system would create the circumstances of the international media that are impacted by it. As a result, concerns concerning the political self surface, particularly those about knowledge of the use of memes for political performance. Furthermore, memes play a variety of functions in everyday life as a means of self-representation, from those engaging with individuals who have distinct and broad tendencies to those whose political identity can be projected by a shift in style. Memes are a type of choice that uses clever design to spread a message.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Putra, F.D., et. al. "Memes as a Symbol of Political Communication." *Channel Jurnal Komunikasi* Vol. 10, 1 (2022): 85-98. available from <https://doi.org/10.12928/channel.v10i1.22326>.

## Digital Stories and the Role of Virality in Transforming Political Movement

Digital stories are short, multimodal narratives that combine text, images, and audio to convey personal experiences or ideas. Typically, 3-6 minutes long, they allow individuals to engage in critical reflection and express their identities through both linguistic and non-linguistic modes. Digital storytelling originated in 1994 at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, and has since been adopted in various educational contexts.<sup>14</sup> In second language learning, digital stories have been observed to enhance language skills, including speaking, listening, and writing, while also promoting correct grammar and vocabulary usage. Moreover, they contribute to developing multiliteracies and new genres in the digital age. Digital storytelling is especially useful for encouraging teacher reflection and professional development and has been used to give voices to ordinary people's experiences in the digital era.<sup>15</sup>

These internet memes, as such units of digital content that bear common characteristics created, circulated, and transformed by the users, have become an integral part of digital culture. According to Shifman memes encompass major features of participatory Web 2.0 culture and can serve as modes of political participation. The spread of memes is investigated along three dimensions, namely, content, form, and stance.<sup>16</sup> In some contexts, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, viral content is a threat to structural power and is perceived as potentially contaminating. The detection of viral memes in the early stages of spread is a challenging but important task given their social and economic impact. Diffusion patterns of memes within network

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<sup>14</sup> Kathy Brener. "Digital Stories: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication Tool for the English Language Classroom." *English Teaching Forum* Vol. 52 no. 1 (2014): 22-29. available from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1029170.pdf>.

John Hartley. "Digital storytelling around the World." In: 27th National Informatics Conference, September 22-23, 2010, Ankara, Turkey. (Unpublished) available from <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/39546/2/39546.pdf>.

Deoksoon Kim, et., al. "Teacher Professional Identity Development through Digital Stories." *Computers and Education* Vol. 162 (2021). available from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104040>.

<sup>15</sup> Ana Oskoz and Idoia Elola. "Digital Stories: Overview." *Calico Journal* Vol. 33 no. 2 (2016): 157-173. available from [doi: 10.1558/cj.v33i2.29295](https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.v33i2.29295)

<sup>16</sup> Limor Shifman. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 119-123.



communities have indeed been identified as very important for virality prediction, and community-structure-based predictive features can be gained even on a large scale. Considered subjective models that attribute outcomes to postulated causes, political narratives shape shared beliefs among coalition members and influence political mobilization.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, these narratives can be evaluated for their representation of political reality, with scholars employing various strategies to assess their accuracy.<sup>18</sup> Political narratives serve multiple functions: as practice and ontology, mediating political views; as strategy, furthering specific goals; and as a method for analyzing sociopolitical realities.<sup>19</sup> They are important in the strategic adaptation of social movements to political opportunity structures, as activists use storytelling about past experiences to devise strategies for the future. For example, the narrative of defeat from the 2009 Copenhagen Summit in the climate movement influenced their approach to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference, showing how retrospective narratives can guide and potentially limit strategic choices.<sup>20</sup>

Thematic analysis of digital stories revealed common themes such as personal transformation, injustice, and collective struggle. These stories create a sense of shared experience, helping individuals identify with particular political causes or movements. For instance, viral campaigns on climate change or racial justice often use personal struggle stories of overcoming adversities and, in so doing, humanize or make more relatable an otherwise highly political issue to its audience. This narrative strategy develops a sense of group solidarity whereby persons who identify with such stories begin to think of

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<sup>17</sup> Pik-Mai Hui et.al., "Scalable Detection of Viral Memes from Diffusion Patterns." In: Lehmann, S., Ahn, YY. (eds) *Complex Spreading Phenomena in Social Systems: Computational Social Sciences*. London: Springer, 2018) [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77332-2\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77332-2_11).

<sup>18</sup> Shaul Shenhav. "Political Narratives and Political Reality," *International Political Science Review* Vol. 27, no. 3 (2006): 245-262. available from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20445054>.

<sup>19</sup> Stefan Groth. "Political/Narrations of the Political: An Introduction." *Narrative Culture* Vol. 6, no. 1 (2019): 1-18. available from <https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.6.1.0001>

<sup>20</sup> Joost de Moor and Mattias Wahlström. "Narrating Political Opportunities: Explaining Strategic Adaptation in the Climate Movement." *Theory and Society* Vol. 48 (2019): 419-451. available from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-019-09347-3>.

themselves as part of the collective struggle. Content analysis also shows that these digital stories, in their viral spread, make their way across various online communities, helping reinforce in-group identity by developing common frames of narrative. Digital stories do not just carry ideas on politics but also serve as rallying points for solidarity among the like-minded.

Furthermore, the evidence from content analysis identifies virality as playing a crucial role in sustaining and transforming both political movements. It ensures that issues related to a political movement are not buried by a continuous creation of streams around those issues, particularly when there is an ongoing politically critical period like elections or protests. The fast-disseminating nature of memes and digital stories maintains momentum for political movements via continuous audience engagement, showing key issues.

Yet it also appears that, in many cases, virality is remarkably short-lived. Viral content tends to have a limited lifespan as new memes and stories supplant prior ones. That creates a hurdle for political movements requiring sustained involvement. Moreover, while such viral content might give energy to the movement, for the time being, it is easily vulnerable to misinformation. Although sharing an idea or information related to political issues rapidly can be beneficial, the ease with which Internet memes are generated also allows for the dissemination of false information. Internet memes shared on social media do not include written explanations of the content of the meme and limited explanation in Internet meme captions can often oversimplify political arguments. Thematic analysis showed repeated patterns of disinformation and manipulation of political memes going viral, in which untruthful or hyperbolic information spread across the masses contributing to polarization and mistrust. However, the widespread exposure to inaccurate political stories makes the political meme activity especially useful. Not only can the activity encourage critical thinking, but it can also serve to remind students to be critical of content shared on the Internet.<sup>21</sup>

The frequency and context differed in some trends of content analysis of the memes and digital stories during the 2022 election. Memes went viral when they tended to relate to high-profile political events or scandals that would spread across platforms within hours.

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<sup>21</sup> Dominic Wells. "You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking," 2-3.

Most of the context relates to sharing memes based on political allegiance: conservative and liberal groups shared unique types of content, reinforcing preconceived ideas about one another. This also meant that highly visually or video-based memes were much more likely to spread compared to heavy-text posts, reflecting more general importance of engaging and easily consumable formats within digital political communication.

## Conclusion

In 2010, there emerged a series of anti-government movements dubbed as *Arab Spring* where people protested in response to corruption and economic stagnation. Again in 2018, its sequel was dubbed as *Second Arab Spring*, described as the deadliest incident of civil unrest. Moreover, it has been pointed out by most scholars that social media and digital technologies are a means for collective activism to avoid state-operated media channels. Thus, the internet and social media have strikingly expanded the sources and types of political information available to users.<sup>22</sup>

The results of the analysis provide insight into how memes, viral content, and digital stories build political narratives and shape political mobilization in the digital era. The recurring motifs of us vs. them dichotomies, emotional appeals, and particularly satire the strength of such elements in simplifying complex political issues into simplified, emotionally engaging narratives that appeal to wide audiences. Simplification in support and emotional appeal are needed; digital spaces require that content should be easily consumable and shareable for virality. The emotional resonance of memes- be they humorous, angry, or prideful ultimately what drove their viral nature, serving to amplify political narratives and sustain engagement in politically charged moments of the 2022 presidential election.

It is in this process of their creation and spread that the role of memes in influencing political discourse becomes evident, as it is often across partisan lines to show how these digital artifacts reflect and reinforce ideological positions, thereby shaping public perception about candidates and issues. Equally important are digitally

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<sup>22</sup> Andrey Halversen and Brian Weeks. "Memeing Politics: Understanding Political Meme Creators, Audiences, and Consequences on Social Media." *Social Media + Society*, 9, 4 (2023). Online <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231205588>.

networked stories about personal transformation, injustice, and collective struggle in constructing political identities. These stories humanize political issues, making them relatable by weaving personal experiences into larger narratives that hopefully will resonate with particularly the ones who have started to engage in social justice movements like climate change and racial equality. A sense of shared experience promoted by these stories leads to the solidarity of groups in which individuals identify with a collective movement and strengthen in-group cohesion. This underlines the double function of digital stories, which not only convey political messages but also are strong means for the mobilization of solidarity and collective action. While virality maintains political movements by sustaining issues in visibility and keeping audiences engaged, it is intrinsically a transient concept. The ephemeral character of viral content is a real problem for movements that need sustained momentum. Newer content quickly pushes out older memes and stories, and the window of visibility is pretty small.

Besides, it is very susceptible to disinformation and manipulation, since information can be inexact or exaggerated, distorting political discourses, increasing polarization, and creating suspicion. This pattern of disinformation reveals a dark underpinning to digital virality: the very mechanisms that might allow for a political narrative to go viral can equally be manipulated to propagate misinformation. The findings of the content analysis, such as the leading trends that highly visual or video-based memes tend to be more viral and that sharing of memes highly correlates with political allegiances, indicate the importance of engaging visually compelling formats driving digital political communication. These results show that, although memes, viral content, and digital stories are powerful for building and spreading political narratives, they need critical engagement to temper their impermanence and susceptibility to misinformation.

The paper, therefore, demonstrates how memes, viral content, and digital stories construct political narratives through processes of emotional appeals, simplification of complex issues, and the building of solidarity. While virality can temporarily energize a movement, it does have problems in the way information is the short life span of the content and misinformation. The above findings suggest that in

developing strategies for the critical receipt of the content, media literacy would help navigate political communication in the digital era.

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