

Bernie Sanders' Dank Memes:
New Media's Potential for Grassroots Activism
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Bernie Sanders' Dank Memes

In 2016, Bernie Sanders campaigned for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States. His campaign was notable for many reasons, not least among them his reliance on grassroots support and funding. While most candidates' super PACs fund advertisements, travel, and events, Bernie Sanders received his funding from his supporters at an average of \$27 per donation. Sanders' call for grassroots support also manifested in unexpected ways, such as the production and dissemination of pro-Bernie Sanders memes, particularly those posted by members of the Facebook group Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash (BSDMS).

Some criticize social media-based activism as ineffective and, specifically, argue that the memes produced and shared by BSDMS have no message other than that Bernie is "cool" (Dewey, 2016). However, the large number of group members (460,000 members as of March 3, 2017 ("Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash," 2015)) of BSDMS and its coverage by major news outlets, as well as the widespread sharing of BSDMS memes indicates that the group has significance beyond mere amusement. The memes produced by BSDMS members are complex cultural artifacts that convey specific messages about the creators' reasons for supporting Bernie Sanders' candidacy. The creation and distribution of these memes by Sanders' supporters represents a type of grassroots political activism uniquely suited to Western cultures in the 21st century.

Memes

The term "meme" was first used in 1870 by Austrian sociologist Ewald Hering, who developed the term "die Mneme" from the Greek word "mneme," or memory (Shifman,

2014: 10). However, the term did not gain cultural relevance until Dawkins incorporated the term in *The Selfish Gene* to mean “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (1976: 170). Dawkins (1976) described the process of memes “leaping from brain to brain” as a manner of imitation (171). He further clarified that successful memes must have “longevity/fecundity/copying-fidelity” (Dawkins, 1976: 22), which essentially means that memes must have the capacity to exist for a significant period of time, be able to be copied numerous times, and be copied with relative accuracy (Shifman, 2014: 17).

However, memes originally had no relationship to digital culture. The term has subsequently developed to mean “*a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance...that were created with awareness of each other...via the Internet by many users*” (Shifman, 2014: 8, her emphasis). The above definition best describes the memes that circulate widely across social media platforms, as iterations share multiple characteristics and each manifestation is altered slightly from the last. The ease of copying, imitating, and/or sharing content on the Internet is ideal for spreading memes to a wide variety of audiences (Goriunova, 2014: 63).

Although the content of memes is often humorous, memes are complex texts that can have significant cultural consequences. Shifman (2014) argues that “Memes may best be understood as *pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon*” (18, her emphasis). While memes begin as a singular cultural artifact, their imitability and shareability makes them accessible to a wide audience. A successful meme references issues relevant to its audience as well as incorporating popular culture in the form of “culturally relevant songs, jokes, or sayings”

(Vie, 2014). Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) argue that memes do not merely replicate aspects of contemporary culture, but can also provide means for negotiating cultural norms (1700). Thus, although memes often reflect social norms and attitudes, they can also convey the creator's/sharer's response to current conditions.

The “bottom-up” model of meme transmission is also reminiscent of grassroots movements. Goriunova (2014) describes memes as “digital images, often superimposed with text, formulaic behaviors, [and] animations...which emerge in a grassroots manner” (55). Not only is the production and sharing of memes a grassroots process, but such platforms as *Knowyourmeme* also engage in a “grassroots research methodology” that uses crowd-sourced research to categorize and explain various memes (Goriunova, 2014: 55). Rather than the typical “top-down” model of cultural transmission of blockbuster films, memes are a form of cultural expression and negotiation that originate with the public.

Memes and Grassroots Activism

The ease with which memes are generated and shared enables their use by grassroots activists. Grassroots activism is “a group of people who feel strongly enough about an issue to actively campaign to make a difference” (Crystal, 2016). Similarly to memes themselves, grassroots activism can begin with a single individual and spread to a wide audience (Crystal, 2016). The process of meme creation and dissemination is not restricted to an elite few, so any networked citizen with the inclination can participate. Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson (2016) discuss the accessibility of sites like memegenerator, which make meme development “easy” (1997). This content is then distributed over the Internet, typically through social media platforms, which “provide a technological basis for grassroots action to coordinate and

activists to communicate” (Neumayer & Raffl, 2008: 3). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow activists to contact a wide audience who may be sympathetic to the proposed cause.

Memes allow citizens to respond in “real time” to events, and their creation is not hindered by issues of censorship (Ross & Rivers, 2017: 3). The production of memes allows the creator to address current affairs and participate in a discussion about the changes s/he feels are necessary (Shifman, 2014: 120). Due to the ease of creating and dispersing memes, disenfranchised individuals with no real power in government can express their ideas and opinions and potentially generate support. This supports the observation of Shifman (2014) that “The analysis of memes as political action tends to stress their role in *citizen empowerment*” (127, her emphasis). The ease of accessibility positions memes as a powerful means for grassroots engagement.

Although memes allow for grassroots political engagement, some argue that their impact is not significant. Criticism of “slacktivism” contends that political participation via social media and other Internet-based political actions cause an individual to feel as though s/he has participated without making any meaningful contribution. However, Vie (2014) argues that memes “can have significant impacts on off-line behaviors.” The use of memes in recent political campaigns and movements attests to the power of these cultural artifacts in uniting individuals around a common cause. For instance, the American Occupy Wall Street movement was largely “energized and backed” by the Internet’s “prominent meme hubs...Reddit and Tumblr” (Shifman, 2014: 132).

Notably, Barack Obama's 2008 campaign also made use of memes. His campaign is considered the first "Web 2.0 campaign" in which users generated a massive number of politically-oriented memes and other digital content (Shifman, 2014: 120). The use of digital media helped motivate his supporters to contribute in myriad unexpected ways (Shifman, 2014: 122). Martinez-Rolan and Pineiro-Otero (2016) label Obama the "*memecrat* par excellence" (147, their emphasis) due to his use of digital content for political communication. Thus, memes have already demonstrated their relevance in influencing political realities. This may be in part because individuals tend to be more influenced by content created and shared by friends and family members (Shifman, 2014: 124).

The creation and distribution of memes can therefore legitimately impact the "offline" world. Political memes can have a number of interwoven purposes, such as "persuasion or political advocacy," "grassroots action," and "expression and public discussion" (Shifman, 2014: 122-3). These three purposes are often embodied in a single meme. Vie (2014) also stresses the importance of cause-related memes as they can raise awareness of social issues and their visibility can help create communities of support for marginalized populations. The power of memes stems from the fact that they are no longer merely "an image, but rather an idea" (Martinez-Rolan & Pineiro-Otero, 2016: 147) that can serve to empower disenfranchised communities.

Memes and Facebook

Memes as a genre originated on an image-board called 4chan, which caters to a niche group of users (Gourinova, 2014: 70). Once memes achieve a certain amount of popularity, they "spill over" onto other platforms; specifically, in a diagram cited by Gourinova (2014),

memes move from 4chan, to reddit, to Digg!, to Facebook, “suggesting a route through which a particular meme spills over...into ‘mainstream’ culture” (70). Thus, while other platforms may serve a more limited audience, Facebook represents mainstream culture and an opportunity for memes to reach the greatest number of users.

In December 2016, approximately 1.23 billion users accessed Facebook each day (Stats, 2017). The Pew Research Center states that, compared to other social media platforms, Facebook is the most widely used (2017). In addition, Facebook users are the “most broadly representative of the population as a whole” (“Social Media Fact Sheet,” 2017). Therefore, a grassroots activist with hopes of spreading ideas would have access to the most potential supporters by disseminating content via Facebook. Not only are there numerous Facebook users, but each user likely checks her/his account at least once per day (“Social Media Fact Sheet,” 2017), so updated content is likely to be encountered. Thus, examining memes posted and shared via Facebook provides an understanding of the content with which average networked Americans would interact.

Memes and Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash

Within the Facebook community there are groups devoted to specific regions, topics, or affiliations. These groups can be open (anyone can join) or closed (new members must be invited by administrators or current group members). Within the group, members post related content and are policed by other members. Facebook groups can function to enable the development of a collective identity within the group. This collective identity formation requires continuous “production, performance, and validation of values” (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016: 1699), which can be accomplished through posting and responding to content.

Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash (BSDMS) is an open Facebook group in which members construct a collective identity as supporters of Bernie Sanders' 2016 campaign for the Democratic nomination for the president of the United States. The group was created in October 2015 by two college students, Will Dowd and Sean Walsh ("Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash," 2016). The first meme, posted on October 1, 2015, garnered only 11 likes ("Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash," 2016) meaning that it was likely not viewed or shared by many users. However, by January 13, 2016 the group had grown to 5,000 members, and by February 16, 2016 it had more than 250,000 members ("Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash," 2016).

With growing numbers of members, the fecundity of the memes increased. The members raised awareness of Bernie Sanders' bid for the nomination by disseminating content outside of the group. The so-called "frenzied denizens" shared "their pro-Sanders creations far and wide: across Facebook, on Reddit, in their Twitter and Tumblr feeds" (Dewey, 2016). The group and its memes even attracted media attention from *The Washington Post* and *Motherboard*, indicating that the popularity of the memes caused them to "spill over" into publications even beyond social media platforms. The group, which had begun with the two founders, gained supporters who then spread their message of support for Bernie Sanders in a form of grassroots activism.

However, there are varying opinions regarding the message of the BSDMS memes. Dewey, of *The Washington Post*, argues that "the group's only overriding message is that Bernie is 'cool'" (2016). Dewey finds the ideas conveyed by the memes to be non-specific and uninformative, although she acknowledges the significance of the widespread and

popular memes produced by members of BSDMS. However, Buzz, of *Motherboard*, argues that “the memes are explanatory, deconstructive, self-aware, and incendiary” (2016). He claims the content appeals to a wider audience than the Internet niches with which memes are typically associated (Buzz, 2016). He equates this appeal to the masses with Bernie Sanders’ platform of inclusion and equality (Buzz, 2016). “Everyone is welcome to enjoy the commentary on Bernie Sanders,” Buzz explains, “much like you are welcome onboard Bernie’s Revolution wagon” (2016).

Although “all” may be welcome to support Sanders’ campaign, not all content posted in BSDMS is well-received. For instance, a recent BSDMS post featured a screenshot of a former Sanders’ supporter unsubscribing from Sanders’ listserv, claiming, “...you are now just sheep-dogging innocent, caring people back to the evil Democrats” and urging Sanders’ supporters to listen to Infowars.com (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 13 April 2017), Alex Jones’ controversial right-wing website. BSDMS members responded angrily, arguing that the post had no credibility because of its reference to Infowars, while others demanded the post be removed (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 2015). Content of which the majority of BSDMS members do not approve is therefore not welcome in BSDMS. Only messages deemed sufficiently supportive of Sanders (or antagonistic toward Clinton) receive positive feedback.

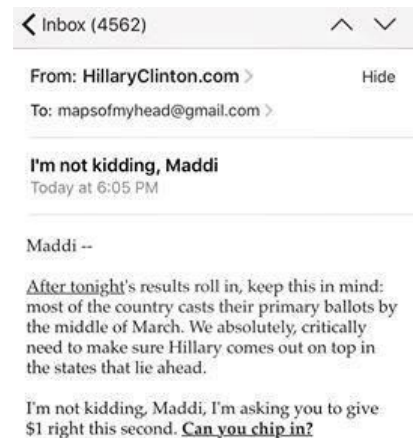
Methods

While researching the Facebook group BSDMS, I encountered a number of news articles regarding specific memes from the group: “I’m Not Kidding, Maddy,” “Bernie vs. Hillary,” and “Bernie Would Have Won.” Because these memes had reached an audience

beyond members of the Facebook group they represented the spreadability of the media, as well as the ideas, being produced by BSDMS members. The articles were published in February 2015, so I examined all BSDMS images beginning in the end of February 2015 through the beginning of April 2016, when I began this research. I then excluded any exact iterations, so that each version of each meme was included only once. I finished by investigating the remaining memes (16 “I’m Not Kidding, Maddi,” 942 “Bernie vs. Hillary,” and 38 “Bernie Would Have Won”) for any prominent themes in order to determine what information was being conveyed via these popular memes.

“I’m Not Kidding, Maddi”

The “I’m Not Kidding, Maddi” meme was sparked by a screen shot (“I’m Not Kidding, Maddi,” 2016, at right) of an email received by a woman named Maddi Epping, who posted the image in BSDMS (Thomas, 2016). After Sanders beat Clinton in the New Hampshire primaries by a 20% margin (Horton, 2016), Epping received an email from Clinton’s campaign stating, “I’m not kidding, Maddi, I’m asking you to give \$1 right this second” (Thomas, 2016). Members of BSDMS began producing (Horton, 2016) (primarily) image-macros, or images overlaid with text (Shifman, 2014: 111), featuring the phrase “I’m not kidding, Maddi” and variations thereof. The meme was then shared on Twitter, where it became the “hard-trending” hashtag #imnotkiddingmaddi (Thomas, 2016).



In her interview with *The Dot*, Epping explains that she does not “necessarily dislike” Clinton, and that she “get[s] emails from [Clinton’s] campaign for a reason,” meaning she subscribed to receive emails from the Clinton camp (Thomas, 2016). Epping’s original reaction was that Clinton’s “campaign [was] saying silly things to try and get voters” (Thomas, 2016). This explanation is consistent with Phillips’ definition of “lulz” as “celebrat[ing] the anguish of the laughed-at victim” (2015: 27), which most Internet trolls cite as the reason behind their activities online. However, the popularity of the meme among BSDMS members, and even wider audiences, indicates that the phrase itself resonated with Sanders’ supporters’ criticism of Clinton. Bertrand, of *SocialNewsDaily*, posits that the explosive reaction to “I’m Not Kidding, Maddi,” stemmed from Clinton’s “desperate schmoozing with millennials,” who are not “interested in pandering, they’re interested in issues” (Bertrand, 2016). Bertrand’s language indicates a personal bias against Clinton, which may impact his reading of the memes. For those disinclined to vote for Clinton, memes such as “I’m Not Kidding, Maddi,” can reflect already-held beliefs. Although Bertrand carries an obvious bias against Clinton, his explanation offers insight into the motivation of “I’m Not Kidding, Maddi” producers and sharers.

Although “I’m Not Kidding, Maddi” was wildly popular at its inception on February 9, 2016, it was quickly replaced by new memes, which is apparent in the scarcity of iterations after February 27, 2016. However, the 16 memes I was able to collect demonstrate a variety of uses of the meme; they were posted sporadically until the latest iteration, which was published on February 15, 2017. Among those collected, many feature the text superimposed over images of Clinton with no other obvious context. However, Epping related that many

BSDMS members saw Clinton's email as "desperate" and "a bit of harassment," and suggested that the campaign "was using scare tactics to try and persuade voters" (Thomas, 2016). This opinion is illustrated by many of the memes, which feature images intended to convey intimidation and fear.

The first included example of this meme is simplistic, featuring only a close-up of Clinton's face with a tense expression. The image was clearly manipulated to convey an impression of a threat, with the phrase "I still want that dollar, Maddy" superimposed over top of Clinton's face in the closely-cropped image (Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, 1 March 2016, "I Still Want That Dollar, Maddy"). The cropping conveys the impression of being in close contact with Clinton, enhancing the feeling of intimidation. This image does not offer viewers any additional context, although disfavor of Clinton is evident due to the creator's chosen photo. However, other iterations of the "I'm not kidding, Maddy" meme incorporated additional elements, such as images and text from popular culture with which the viewer is assumed to be familiar.



The image below (Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, 15 February 2017) features a scene from Stephen King's *The Shining*, in which Jack Nicholson's character, Jack Torrance,



uses an ax to break into the bathroom where his wife, Shelley Duvall's Wendy Torrance, is hiding ("The Shining: Full Cast and Crew," 2017). However, in this image, the producer has replaced Nicholson's face coming through the bathroom door with Hillary



Clinton's, and the ax Torrence uses to break down the door with an image of the original "I'm not kidding, Maddi" email. This meme supports Epping's suggestion that BSDMS members saw the email as threatening, a "scare tactic" to attempt to get more voters/donors. Whereas in the original film Jack wields an ax in an attempt to kill his wife, Clinton is seen as wielding a threatening email in an attempt to get Epping (and other voters) to donate money and support her campaign.

Another example of the meme's use to convey a predatory image of Clinton is the image below (Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, 22 June 2016). This image features Clinton ostensibly staring intensely at a constituent. In this instance, the meme creator has paired the phrase "I'll get that dollar, Maddi," over Clinton's head with the phrase "And your little dog too" beneath Clinton's head. This second line is a reference to the iconic Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, who threatens Dorothy and her "little dog, too." Again, Clinton is positioned as the villain, intimidating her victim in an attempt to manipulate her/him.



The portrayal of Clinton as the Wicked Witch of the West could also be interpreted as "hostile sexism," which "is a negative view of women characterized by conflict (i.e., resistance to women gaining power)" (Strain, Saucier, and Martens, 2015). The propagation of sexist humor within the group is a cause for concern, as humor provides a means through which individuals can express sexist beliefs while retaining other possible explanations for their behavior, such as claiming they were just joking (Strain, Saucier, and Martens, 2015). The potentially sexist message of the "I'll get the dollar, Maddi," meme is not the first

allegation of sexism directed at Sanders' supporters, some of whom have been described as "distinctly bro-ish" (Rouner, 2016).

The term "Berniebro" was originally created by Robinson Meyer in an article entitled "Here Comes the Berniebro," published in *The Atlantic* on October 17, 2015 ("Berniebro," 2016). The term references "fanatical male supporters" of Sanders, who ostensibly opposed Clinton based on sexist ideologies ("Berniebro," 2016). As Umrigar (2016) of *The Huffington Post* states, Berniebros refuse to see "their own privilege, even when countless women pointed it out to them." Umrigar (2016) relates that she experienced online discrimination and bullying at the hands of Berniebros, who accused her of supporting Clinton exclusively because Clinton is a woman. Nor is Umrigar's experience unique for women in online communities.

While the internet is often lauded as a neutral space in which diverse people can interact freely, cultural biases are reproduced in the digital environment (Braithwaite, 2014: 707). In particular, the gaming environment often features "extreme and virulent lashing out" at marginalized communities and women in particular (Salter and Blodgett, 2012: 402), who are seen as "trespassing" in a male space (Braithwaite, 2014: 707). Indeed, such spaces have been characterized as sites of hypermasculinity, a term which describes "the exaggeration of masculine cultural stereotypes within subcultures" (Salter and Blodgett, 2012: 402). The expression of anti-feminist sentiments in online communities is part of a "zero-sum approach to gender and power" which views feminist gains as a detraction from men's power (Braithwaite, 2014: 710). While Salter and Blodgett (2012) discuss primarily video games as

contributing to hypermasculine identities and actions, the consumption and production of sexist memes can also reproduce sexist cultural norms.

However, others view the complaints against Berniebros as “a potent political tactic – and a journalistic disgrace” (Greenwald, 2016). Greenwald (2016) of *The Intercept* argues that the narrative about Berniebros, propagated by “pro-Clinton journalists,” assumes that Sanders’ supporters dislike Clinton based primarily on her sex rather than her voting record and that only Sanders’ supporters harass individuals online. In addition, Greenwald (2016) claims that the Berniebro myth excludes the “literally millions of women” who oppose Clinton in favor of Sanders. The accusations of sexism are intended, Greenwald (2016) alleges, to draw attention away from “Clinton’s policy views, funding, and political history.” While Clinton supporters are certainly subjected to abuse online, Greenwald (2016) contends that such abuse is not directly related to Sanders’ supporters, but to the internet at large. Greenwald (2016) faults the Clinton campaign for exploiting the “very real and serious problem” of online harassment to bolster Clinton’s popularity while denigrating Sanders’ supporters.

Given the varied nature of responses to the so-called Berniebros, it is difficult to determine the extent of sexism perpetrated by Sanders’ supporters. Hess, of *Slate*, argues that “...both viewpoints are correct, depending on how you choose your Twitter feed” (2016, “Everyone is Wrong”). Hess contends that, while the Berniebro phenomenon started as a “necessary critique of leftist sexism,” it ultimately became a catch-all for Sanders’ supporters despite lack of specific evidence (2016, “Everyone is Wrong”). It is certainly true, however, that Clinton faced difficulties specific to women; neither the “‘authentic’ older woman” nor

the “older woman who strains to stay relevant” are particularly appreciated in contemporary American culture (Hess, 2015). While Clinton faced sexism during her campaign, the extent of sexist discourse originating among Sanders’ supporters is unclear.

While the “I’m not kidding, Maddi” meme was obviously intended to be humorous, its combination of images and references to popular culture seem to convey a specific meaning, as well. BSDMS members portray Clinton’s attempts to gain support as intimidation of them and their chosen candidate, Bernie Sanders. In addition, their clear mockery of the phrase “I’m not kidding, Maddi,” conveys the impression that BSDMS members were neither intimidated, nor impressed, by Clinton’s attempts to rally support. While it is difficult to determine the intent of meme producers, the message they seem to be conveying is that Clinton is a “villain” who must be resisted; however, BSDMS members’ employment of the meme can also be seen as examples of the “feminist killjoy” (Braithwaite, 2014: 708) trope, directed at Clinton’s encroachment upon the patriarchal system by seeking election to the highest office of power in the United States.

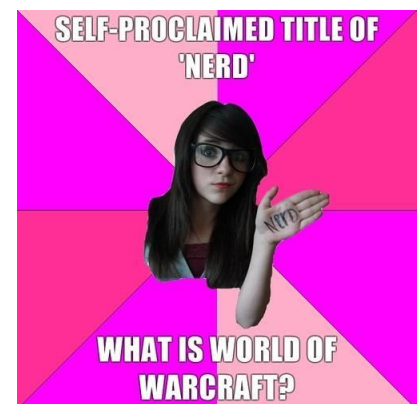
“Bernie or Hillary”

The “Bernie or Hillary” originated in content posted by user ObviousPlant on Tumblr and reddit/Imgur on January 28, 2016 (“Bernie or Hillary,” 2016). ObviousPlant originally posted a set of 12 images (“Bernie or Hillary,” 2016) mimicking a typical election poster that states “Bernie or Hillary? Be informed. Compare them on issues that really matter” (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”). Each poster features an “issue,” about which Bernie is “depicted as being more knowledgeable than Clinton” (“Bernie or Hillary,” 2016). While the meme

originated on other platforms, the members of BSDMS popularized the meme, which was easy to modify due to its simple format (“Bernie or Hillary,” 2016).

In the typical “Bernie or Hillary” meme, Sanders is portrayed as “passionate and charming,” while Clinton is depicted as “insufferable and cloying” (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”). There are a number of different “issues” to which the candidates ostensibly respond, but many are obscure cultural references which feature Clinton’s inability to authentically reply (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”). The meme has stirred controversy, as some contend that it “doesn’t exactly fight fair” (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”) with regard to Clinton’s policy experience. As Amanda Hess of *Slate* writes, “It compares how Clinton fields softball questions with how Sanders replies to hard ones” (2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”). In addition, the meme and its creators have been widely criticized for the sexist tone of many of its iterations.

The “Bernie or Hillary” meme is not the first to position a female as incapable of understanding or engaging with typically male-dominated subcultures such as sports and gaming. Rouner (2016) of *Houston Press* compares the “Bernie or Hillary” memes to the earlier “Idiot Nerd Girl” meme (“Idiot Nerd Girl,” 2017), which contends that women are only pretending to be interested in gaming culture in an attempt to “get...a man.” The example at right features a young woman with the word “Nerd” written on her hand, and the text, “Self-proclaimed title of ‘nerd’” and “What is World of Warcraft?” intimating that the woman is only pretending to have an interest in so-called nerd culture. What Rouner (2016) refers to as the “giggling stereotype of



a woman unable to master technology” remains pervasive in contemporary media, and is represented in the “Bernie or Hillary” meme through Clinton’s inability to “understand football” or “dank memes” (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”).

However, opinions of the “Bernie or Hillary” meme are divided. As one BSDMS member explained, “The meme is supposed to show that Bernie [knows] what he’s talking about and is relatable while Hillary is out of touch and flip flops” (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”). In particular, the pop culture references frequently showcased by the “Bernie or Hillary” meme can be seen as a reaction to the Clinton campaign’s youth outreach strategy (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”). The contrast between a “68-year-old grandparent who pronounce Beyonce ‘Bay-once’” and the online persona of a “millennial fangirl” (Hess, 2015) leads Clinton critics to accuse her of pandering in an attempt to secure youth votes. Thus, the meme’s portrayal of Clinton as out-of-touch may be leveling a critique at the Clinton campaign’s attempt to reach young voters, which included a Bitmoji Hillary-themed avatar and a post asking “followers to tweet their feelings on student debt ‘in 3 emoji or less’” (Hess, 2015). Producers/sharers of the “Bernie or Hillary” meme may therefore be reacting to Clinton’s perceived insincerity toward the concerns of Millennial voters.

In investigating the “Bernie or Hillary” meme, I identified a number of themes related to the presented “issues.” The three most prominent themes were: music, food, and the behaviors/positions of Sanders. I then analyzed the use of each theme to determine the message that each was typically being used to convey about Sanders and/or Clinton. While many fit the formula suggested by Hess in which Clinton unsuccessfully attempts to relate to

popular culture (2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”), others conveyed more specific arguments about Sanders and Clinton.

Music

Music-themed “Bernie or Hillary” memes all convey a message alleging Clinton’s inability to relate to popular culture. Some mention a specific band, to which Clinton responds by parroting a mainstream single while Sanders competently lists obscure albums and songs.

One such example is included to the right (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 10 March 2016), in which the issue is “The Smiths,” a British band from the 1980s featuring front man Morrissey (“The Smiths Bio,” 2017). Sanders responds with a coherent statement that



showcases his knowledge of the band, while Clinton responds with “They do ‘Suedehead,’ right? Best song ever,” naming a solo single released by Morrissey. This particular iteration features the potentially sexist comparison for which the meme was criticized, in which Clinton, as a woman, is not considered capable of sincere interest in and appreciation for the band or popular culture in general.

Another typical example of music-themed “Bernie or Hillary” memes features a



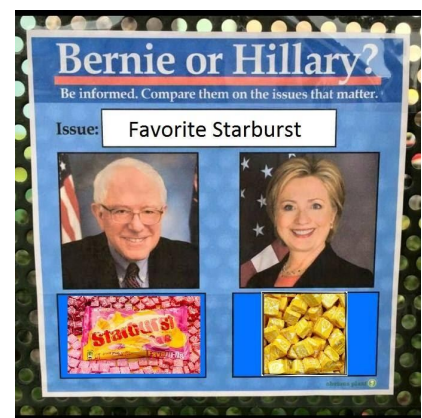
genre of music as the issue. The example to the left (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 6 July 2016) considers the issue of Funk music. Again, Sanders

demonstrates specific knowledge of the genre as well as specific bands. In contrast, Clinton responds with lyrics from the popular song “Uptown Funk,” by Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars, which was released in 2015. Again, the message conveyed by the poster is that Clinton possesses no real knowledge of the topic at hand, but attempts to relate by repeating information she received from mainstream media sources.

Food

“Bernie or Hillary” memes related to food formed another predominant trend. This is unsurprising, as Barthes (1979) described food as “...a system of communication” (21). Increasingly, food is represented in cultural heritage narratives in media, which help form viewers’ identities (Tomascikova, 2015: 53). The intrinsic relation between food and the physical body helps develop “a relationship between eating and identity” (Tomascikova, 2015: 53). Food representations in media can also transfer prior “value systems” into “contemporary representations of identities” (Tomascikova, 2015: 56). Thus, food is legitimately representative of culture and identity, which may be why it was so prevalent in the “Bernie or Hillary” meme.

In the included example (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 15 January 2017), the issue of choice is “Favorite Starburst.” Sanders’ choice is the pink Starburst, called the “cult-favorite” (Saelinger, 2017). In contrast, Clinton’s choice is the yellow candy, which is, by comparison, less popular with Starburst fans. While the music memes feature Clinton’s lack of knowledge about the topic, the food memes portray Clinton as out-of-sync with cultural trends.



The meme conveys the message that Clinton is out-of-touch with what young voters want (Hornby, 2016).

Other food-related iterations of “Bernie or Hillary” have seemingly little cultural context. For example, the image included below (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 6 March 2016) focuses on the issue “Breakfast.” In this version, it is clear that Sanders prefers pancakes, while Clinton prefers waffles. Although there may be some ulterior significance to the rhetorical choices made by the creator of this specific iteration, it mostly seems to convey the creator’s preference. There is no known specific cultural trend related to the pancakes versus waffles debate. Therefore, while some iterations of “Bernie or Hillary” convey messages about Clinton’s relationship to cultural trends, others seem to be a matter of merely personal preference.



Behaviors/Positions

A third “Bernie or Hillary” trend refers to Sanders’ and Clinton’s behaviors and perceived positions on issues. These memes typically feature a comparison between the two candidates with the intent of showcasing Sanders as the candidate with more integrity. More so than the music- and food-themed iterations, these are directly related to characteristics of the candidates, although the memes are obviously biased due to their creation and circulation by Sanders’ supporters. Unlike questions related to popular culture, to which Sanders responds with “dismissal and hostility” (Hess, 2016, “Bernie vs. Hillary”), the issues promoted in these iterations would more likely elicit a thoughtful response from the senator.

The first example (Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, 1 March 2016, "Bernie or Hillary: Political Funding") highlights the issue of campaign finance, which was a major issue with which the Sanders' campaign was concerned. Sanders' response, "Millions of people," refers to his grassroots-funded campaign, in which the average donation was \$27. According to Pennington, digital



director of Sanders' campaign, by June 7, 2016, the campaign had raised 215 million dollars from approximately 8 million contributors (Alexander and Cresci, 2016). Clinton's response, "People who are millionaires," echoes the criticisms levied against her expensive fundraising dinners, for which the cost was prohibitive to the average American citizen. Sanders' has repeatedly touted the need for campaign finance reform, arguing that politicians who are funded by billionaires no longer represent the needs of the people, but only those of their donors. He vehemently opposed the overturning of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission in 2010, a decision which allows unlimited contributions to campaigns from corporations (Cole, 2016). As one of Sanders' key talking points was the "need for real campaign finance reform" (Sanders, 2016), this version of the "Bernie or Hillary" meme addresses an aspect of his platform.

The next example (Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, 25 May 2016) addresses the topic of the California debate for the Democratic Presidential nominee. Specifically, it references Clinton's decision not to debate Sanders in California. At the time, Clinton had reportedly referred to herself as the decided Democratic nominee (Merica and Stelter, 2016)



and declined to debate Sanders, which resulted in angry responses from Sanders' supporters who had yet to vote. At the time, Sanders stated that he was "disappointed but not surprised" by Clinton's decision not to participate in a debate before what he called "the largest and most important primary in the presidential nominating process" (Merica and Stelter, 2016). Therefore, Sanders' response, "Not keeping your promise to debate is an insult to the people of California," is in keeping with his response, although the agonistic tone of the statement is more reflective of the creator's message than Sanders' own. Similarly, Clinton's response that "I already won so tell all the people yet to vote not to bother voting for me because their vote doesn't matter" is partly factual and partly representative of the creator's argument about Clinton.

"Bernie Would Have Won"

The phrase "Bernie Would Have Won" began on Twitter following the 2016 presidential election ("Bernie Would Have Won," 2016). At its inception, Sanders' fans used the phrase sincerely to argue that Sanders would have beaten President Donald Trump in the general election; over time, the expression became a phrasal meme ("Bernie Would Have Won," 2016). As related by *KnowYourMeme*, Sanders supporters originally used the phrase "to argue against Democrats who believed that Sanders' candidacy hurt Clinton in the general election" before the phrase became a manner of trolling Clinton supporters for their supposedly unfair treatment of Sanders in the primary ("Bernie Would Have Won," 2016).

The meme, while seemingly straightforward, has been interpreted two ways. The most basic interpretation of the meme views it as a response to the "leaked emails [which] revealed Democratic Party officials were biased" against Sanders during the primary

(Associated Press, 2017). Thus, the meme means exactly what it says: “Sanders, had he been given the chance, would have taken down Trump” (Associated Press, 2017). However, some see the meme as an attempt to hold the Democratic Party responsible for the events of the 2016 election season. It references the Democratic Party’s disconnect from its voter base; proponents of “Bernie Would Have Won,” feel that the Party’s preferred candidate did not represent the choice of the people (Baron, 2017). So-called “left Democrats” view the 2016 election “as a rejection of the Democratic Party’s ties to Wall Street and its consistent failure to present a meaningful agenda of economic change” (Baron, 2017). Thus, the “Bernie Would Have Won” meme references failures of the past but also demands change in the future.

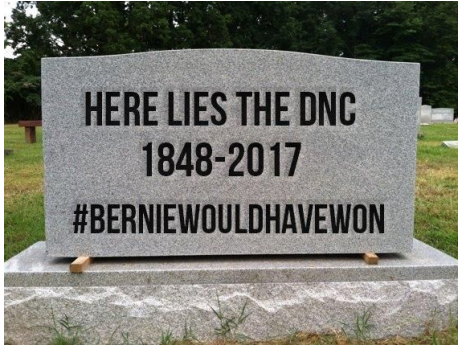
The first “Bernie Would Have Won” meme was posted in BSDMS on December 18, 2016, and the meme continues to persist in mid-2017. In my search, I excluded all variations of the phrase, such as “I would have won” and “Bernie would’ve won,” focusing only on iterations featuring the exact phrase “Bernie Would Have Won.” I located 38 versions of the meme matching these specifications. Many of the memes feature content from popular culture, such as television shows and movies. Others are image macros of political figures or illustrated comics. All feature the phrase “Bernie Would Have Won” combined with visual content.

The first example (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 2 February 2017) features a picture of President Trump holding up an executive order. However, instead of containing the actual order, the image has been altered so that “Bernie Would



Have Won” is written on one page, while a sketch of Sanders is superimposed on the other page. As the image features President Trump, this iteration of the meme most strongly resonates with the message that Sanders could have stopped President Trump from winning the election.

The second example (Bernie Sanders’ Dank Meme Stash, 25 February 2017) deals



more directly with the perceived failings of the Democratic Party. This iteration features a tombstone with the message “Here Lies the DNC 1848-2017.” The Democratic National Committee (DNC) was formed during the Democratic National Convention of 1848

(“The Democratic National Committee,” 2017). Therefore, the dates represent the inception and, ostensibly, the destruction of the DNC. The implication is that the DNC is no longer a relevant organization due to its inability to cater to the desires of its constituents. The image features the hashtag #BernieWouldHaveWon as a further assertion of the DNC’s role in the result of the 2016 presidential election.

Discussion

There is no denying that memes have become increasingly important in political discourse in recent years (Hornby, 2016). Wells, founder and executive director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Culver City, compares memes to the political posters that were popular in previous elections. Making and distributing memes is much easier – and faster – than creating and distributing posters (Miranda, 2016). BSDMS members create and distribute Bernie Sanders propaganda “faster than any super PAC,” framing Sanders’

platform in a medium that resonates even with members of the public who are not initiated into the complexities of the political system (Hornby, 2016). The distribution of pro-Sanders memes on social media platforms was particularly important to the Sanders campaign, which was not “being taken seriously by mainstream media outlets,” as Pennington reports (Alexander and Cresci, 2016). “In many ways,” Pennington relates, “social media is the new door knock of the 21st century” (Alexander and Cresci, 2016). Thus, memes constitute a significant manner of engaging in political activism.

The pro-Sanders content developing in BSDMS also represents grassroots engagement due to the bottom-up method of production and dissemination. Memes are particularly suited to grassroots involvement because “anybody with a working computer, not just artists” can make them (Miranda, 2016). Social media is positioned as the “voice of the underdog...an alternative to mainstream media, [and] the space of the amateur” according to Gerbaudo, a professor of digital culture at King’s College London (Alexander, Chambers, and Sanderson, 2017). Therefore, social media platforms offer grassroots activists the opportunity to make their position known, as well as “find other people whose opinion they share” (Alexander, Chambers, and Sanderson, 2017). Pennington is “familiar with the Dank Meme Stash,” relating that they are “big fans of it...at the office” (Alexander and Cresci, 2016), however the Sanders campaign was not involved in the creation of the group or its memes. The content and community was created by grassroots organizers (although they may not self-identify as such) seeking to promote Sanders’ campaign.

As Sanders did not win the election, some might deem BSDMS slacktivism, which is associated with “political ineffectiveness” (Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya, 2017: 4).

However, the record number of donations that Sanders received indicates that his grassroots support (of which BSDMS represents only one component) was not wholly ineffective. In addition, Sanders' progression from polling at 24.7% when BSDMS was created in October 2015 to 44% by April 2016 (2016 National Democratic Primary, 2016), suggests that Sanders succeeded in developing a competitive campaign (although the impact of BSDMS remains unknown). As Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya assert, "having an online presence is critically important" to activism in the 21st century (2017: 7); thus, BSDMS may be seen as playing an important role.

Conclusion

BSDMS is a grassroots collective of activists attempting, at first, to help elect Senator Bernie Sanders as the Democratic nominee for President of the United States. However, the group members have continued creating and disseminating content following the election, suggesting that there are future political goals as well. Although some of the content has been criticized for leveling sexist critiques against Clinton, many of the memes argue that Sanders is more in touch with voters than Clinton and that the Democratic Party no longer serves the demands of its constituents. While some online Sanders' supporters needed to be reminded that "their goal is not to deliver the sickest burn or capture the perfect tweet illustrating the stupidity of Hillary supporters" (Hess, 2016, "Everyone is Wrong"), others continue to make and disseminate memes that push the Sanders agenda. The effectivity of this grassroots activism is a subject for further research, but, regardless, the spread of BSDMS memes indicates that such media now constitutes a significant component of election discourse.

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