



## MEMES AS SYMBOLS OF HATE SPEECH

### The Influence of Graphic Humour on Freedom of Expression and Politics

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#### KEYWORDS

*Memes*  
*Social networks*  
*Hate speech*  
*Internet*  
*Politics*  
*Humour*  
*Freedom of speech*

#### ABSTRACT

*Internet memes have become a cultural and artistic expression of the most popular social networks. Memes are graphic expressions accompanied by a small text that reflect and idea or current news with a certain humorous tone that become viral very easily. This article aims to address the problem of the spread of hate speech through memes that take place on social networks. This dissemination of hate speech through memes is especially relevant in politics and some significant examples of political memes will be analysed to highlight their great influence in the celebration of elections.*

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Received: 01 / 07 / 2024

Accepted: 03 / 02 / 2024

## 1. Introduction

The initial most popular social networks incorporated a series of characteristics that have now turned them into an uncontrolled phenomenon of feeling maximum freedom using the Internet. These networks, which include Facebook, X (former Twitter) or Instagram, have facilitated the spread of opinions, ideas and messages in text or image format at great speed, so that sensitivity and dignity of certain groups can be hurt very easily.

The social relationships that take place on the Internet are increasingly more interdependent and interconnected, however, by implementing a participation channel open to the exchange of ideas and opinions, a space is also established that is prone to insults and hate speech. The comments that fit within the so-called “hate speech” encompass violent messages, racist or xenophobic manifestations, insults about religion, gender issues or disabilities that can reach unexpected heights with a feeling of impunity of those who commit them (Rodríguez, 2013).

Hate speech takes advantage of the great propagation power of the Internet to take to certain extremes messages that are insulting, that contain threats and humiliation, and that also seek to provoke harassment, intimidation, and violence. Within these messages, memes will be highlighted as a means to direct these messages of hate and offenses of all kinds, including sexist memes, racist memes, homophobic memes, among others (Cantillo & Gil Quintana, 2018).

Those memes that have also become fundamental elements of political culture, and that are sometimes also spreaders of hate, are especially striking. In recent years, groups and communities have been created specifically to produce and share memes dedicated to political figures. Many of them are related to thought groups related to the alt-right or far right movement, some are merely satirical and parodic, others carry a deeper indirect message of hate (Collado Campos, 2021).

### *1.1. Memes as an integral part of Internet's cyberculture*

Based on Dawkins' memetic theory, the meme is an element that exists independently of technological advances and that participates in a communicative interaction process that transmits a cultural message to society. Originally, memes are units that contain cultural information, this can consist of musical fragments, ideas about politics or marketing, humour and social customs (Dawkins, 2005).

In the context of social networks, the “meme” as conceived in digital jargon, is a form of visual communication that can take different formats. They are usually graphic expressions in the form of an image that are accompanied by a small text, but they can also be expressed in the form of an animated GIF or video (Gómez García, 2013).

In this way, since the beginning of the so-called Internet 2.0, virtual communities have been formed in which users create or share these forms of communication. Within this “participation culture” or cyberculture, which encourages the personal contribution of each Internet user is encouraged, with low standards for artistic expression and with strong support from the virtual community.

Memes are used as their community own language, with their members spreading and sharing them on social networks with the aim of expressing their creativity and sharing them, so that they have become a great instrument for communication and an appropriate way to transfer any type of information (Jenkins et al, 2009).

Some of the characteristics that are taken advantage of by social networks to use memes are: 1) Repeatability. Memes can be copied, and imitated very easily, and shared through any social network. 2) Permanence over time. Due to the very nature of the Internet, memes have the ability to last indefinitely. 3) Reception and search. Memes can be made for a specific audience, but it is also possible that some non-preconceived interest may arise from some users. Furthermore, the fact that they are found on the Internet makes it easier to search for and access them (Shifman, 2014).

### *1.2. Spreading hate speech on social networks through memes*

With the appearance and subsequent consolidation of social networks, the digital society, although heterogeneous, is defined by the actions and interaction of young people who have been exposed to the new opportunities that these new platforms have served. These spaces offer many possibilities in terms of communication and social and cultural expression, but they are also a channel for increasingly frequent expressions of hate. Although these expressions, like those based on racist and xenophobic

discourse, are not new, it is true that they have adopted new forms of dissemination on social networks (Boyd, 2014).

Although the definition of “hate speech” is used in different areas and doctrines, there is a certain consensus in describing it as that communicative act that focuses hatred against a minority social group of people, whether due to their origin, religion, gender, age, ideology, sexual orientation, disability, illness, or other reasons. This message seeks in some way to intimidate or incite violence based, for example, on causes inspired by racism or homophobia. It is necessary to point out that the punishable act itself is not the expression of these ideas, but rather that these expressions encourage or promote violence, hatred, or discrimination (Julbany & Roiha, 2018).

Social networks have also promoted an aura of anonymity and impunity that inclines Internet users to express these ideas of hatred that they would not do in other “offline” situations. These virtual also cause an illusory effect since participants have the feeling that on the Internet, their acts will have no consequences of any kind (Aguilar García et al, 2015).

Memes that include hate speech cover a wide variety of content, where racist and xenophobic content often predominates, some of them influenced by websites with far-right oriented political ideologies. However, the context in which memes they occur will have to be interpreted by analyzing their exposure and the reactions they provoke in other users, since its spreading could not only be on platforms dedicated solely to the dissemination of racism, but will also be rooted in a context humorous within the possibilities provided by social networks (Julbany & Roiha, 2018).

### ***1.3. The use of memes in politics***

Political memes are nourished by the technical possibilities offered by social networks, especially Twitter/X. On many occasions, memes are constructed in an unsophisticated way; it is not a type of graphic humour that is necessarily finished or perfected, in fact its amateur appearance is its main characteristic. Sometimes, allusions are made to television series or movies, in others, as will be seen, the cartoons link the lack of respect or comparison with certain animals.

Political interactions tend to be constant throughout the year, however, a greater number of interactions are seen in the case of electoral periods and certain events such as electoral debates, often taking advantage of the degree of polarization present in networks to provoke reactions between the two ideological sides that are configured, other times the reaction seeks solely a humorous purpose (Melendez Malavé & Slimovich, 2023).

Memes do not directly generate votes, but they do create cultural meaning. They propose new languages and ways of communicating. In the same piece, ideology, creativity, humour, immediacy, irony and even the absurd are combined. Being able to transmit a message that condenses everything that happens to someone, for example, anger with the economic situation or displeasure with a politician allows all people to identify with a meme (Aytac, 2022).

Many Internet users are also voters, but when talking about digital political communication, the first thing to understand is that neither followers nor likes are exactly equivalent to votes; although the volume and degree of commitment of the digital community can give an indication about the levels of recognition, popularity, and acceptance (Masullo, 2023).

Memes have an important role within the planned content and possible political strategy. They connect with the community and provoke empathy, create recognition, and also generate impact and viralization. The curious thing about the matter is that not only do people make politics with memes, but politicians also make use of them. There is no doubt that memes are diverse, but those used in the world of political communication have a viral impact and may contain hate messages (Volpe & Menichelli, 2023).

## **2. Methodology and objectives**

The objective of this article is to address a review of the phenomenon of the spread of hate speech through the analysis of memes that take place on social networks, which represent harm not only to the groups that are present on those social networks, but also to social groups which are offline.

It will be analysed how this cultural manifestation typical of the digital context is developed through a humorous tone and how it manoeuvres to generate hate speech and negative stereotypes that contribute to strengthening certain prejudices against certain individuals and social groups.

Through documentary analysis of articles and research books, a critical examination will be revealed that points out some aspects that can be improved both socially and legally. To do this, memes will be considered from a cultural and social perspective, pointing out their origin, illustrating some of the most used examples of hate speech, and highlighting its potential clash with fundamental rights.

It will be also pointed out which elements must concur so that a meme can be recognised as an element for the dissemination of hate, as well as which social groups are the most vulnerable and identifiable on social networks. The main difficulties that exist to combat hate speech on the Internet will be exposed, some tools will be proposed, to detect these harmful memes and the most effective current strategies to confront them will be established.

Finally, the relationship between memes and politics and how the latter uses this new tool to influence electoral campaigns will be examined. Two paradigmatic cases will be taken as an example, the first of them considers the transformation of a cartoon into a symbol of hate and the second one is related to the strategies applied to take advantage of the symbols of hate and insults to turn them in your own favour for political gains.

### **3. The original Dawkins's meme has become a digital meme**

Trying to define the "digital meme" is a complex task, since it is still a new form of communication that has appeared with the use of new technologies. The meme opens new possibilities for irony and sarcasm, in a way it constitutes a completely self-referential humorous formula. It is also difficult to classify the meme as a political or artistic manifestation, and as such, it is sometimes confronted by the Law due to the conflicts it generates when transmitting and sharing information (Barnes, 2016).

One of the keys to success in the dissemination of memes is precisely the groups that are formed around an idea, a political position or other beliefs. For example: the denial of the effects of climate change, and consequently the creation of a meme referencing and supporting this idea (Aladro Vico & Jardón Clemente, 2022).

In the environment of social networks, the use of digital language is essential, as well as the creativity with which the message is created. In the end, memes are also subject to conditions of variability, fragmentation, transformation and virality (Aladro Vico, 2017).

Memes allow social groups to get their message across, reinforcing it with their own style that characterizes them (for example, an image or a slogan). Memes also have a very significant aggregation as a symbol since they tend to last in the memory of those who see them, spreading the echo of the message more widely (Ruiz Martínez, 2018).

The varied use of techniques or resources in the composition of the me-me make it a very interesting phenomenon, since in certain areas it can behave as a distinctive sign of a social group. Therefore, if the meme represents a social group or is simply associated with xenophobic attitudes, it can be valued as a symbol of hate (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2022).

#### ***3.1. The power of the digital meme to expand on the Internet***

One of the fundamental characteristics of the nature of the meme is that it is an object for communication, and as such it has a transformative and pragmatic character. In other words, the meme will exist as long as it is spread through social networks, and, in addition, it will be transformed and imitated by other users who wish to share similar ideas or messages (Shifman, 2014).

Some authors point out that one of the functions of the meme also includes that of institutionalizing and normalizing certain discourses or interpretations based on its own innovative action. Therefore, the meme is in itself its own language based on symbols and analogies, capable of fusing and generating grammatical elements thanks to new technologies (Aladro Vico, 2017).

One of the capabilities of the meme is that it is capable of integrating into itself the cultural meanings that have occurred, and also generating a sense of belonging. So this ability to relate reality behaves like a language with functional extension (Aladro Vico & Jardón Clemente, 2022).

Another element that is typical of the creation of languages is that the vast majority of memes are anonymous and do not have any authorship, in this sense they are similar to the forms of popular culture

and art. Therefore, it is a collaborative language that is not attributed to individual creators, but rather acts as a kind of translator of digital culture (Aladro Vico, 2020).

In this digital context, the Internet and especially social networks have become the great enhancers of memes, being the ideal breeding ground for them to spread, since they are maintained in time and space. Social networks are the ideal platforms for this “cyberculture” to spread, since memes contain texts, videos and gifs that show the social situation. At certain levels they even compete with other media such as radio and television, since these are not only disseminated on specialized pages, but are shared on pages of all types (Gómez García, 2013).

These memes are still an interpretation of the reality that society experiences at a given moment. Thus, memes are responsible for disseminating all the information on a relevant topic and causing various reactions among Internet users (González, 2019).

As will be seen below, there are different types of memes, but, nevertheless, humour is the common note of all of them, sometimes it is a subtle humorous tone and other times it is not humorous at all. The sources from which they draw for their creation are practically unlimited, as they come from communicative elements belonging, among others, to cinema, video games, politics or the news, among others.

### ***3.2. Humour as a key to understanding memes***

Emphasis has been placed on how the meme behaves as a symbol and a kind of digital language on social networks and other digital platforms. Usually, the creation of these memes is very simple, you merely choose an image to which you associate some lines of text. However, what is more complex is the author's intentional message, which is carried out in a humorous, sometimes witty, ironic, and self-referential tone, but this subtlety of the message is not always so easy to understand.

Among the most controversial types of memes that can affect fundamental rights, specifically freedom of expression, the right to honour and the right to one's own image, the following stand out:

- 1) The “cultural” content meme. It is a meme that acts as a transmitter of cyberculture on the Internet and certain artistic and postmodernist currents. Sometimes, it is linked to the culture of “resistance” typical of the digital environment and memes may emerge as symbols of protest, in other cases they will only be an imaginative or artistic creation (Bucknell, 2017).
- 2) The “hostile” content meme. It is a meme that is used to offend, harass, or incite hatred, either to individual people or to collective groups. It is also present in school settings as a form of cyberbullying; in these cases, the meme has a clear intention to cause psychological damage (Miño, 2018).
- 3) The meme with “political” content. It is a meme that stands as the vehicle of political expression on the Internet; it normally arises and is shared when some relevant event happens, whether on a national or international scale, or also when a politician is the protagonist of a current news story (Shifman, 2014).

As far as social and legal controversies on social networks are concerned, the meme with “cultural” content can generate conflicts with copyright and intellectual property rights. It can also generate problems due to liability issues of intermediaries or web managers regarding content uploaded without the author's permission. Regarding the issue being analysed, its relationship with hate speech is somewhat timid, since in any case the limit would be met if the meme intends to be a mockery or defame a group (Goklani & Ashleigh, 2017).

As for the “hostile” content meme, this generates many disputes with the right to freedom of expression and unfortunately has a lot of presence on social networks. Obviously, it is one of the main focuses along with the “political” meme in terms of disseminating hate speech (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2022).

The meme with “political” content is more complex, as it can manifest itself in different ways. For example, it can act as a political campaign tool to persuade potential voters. At the same time, and in exactly the opposite way, memes can be generated as a form of protest and “cultural or political” resistance (the so-called political “countermemes”) (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012).

Within this modality, there are also connective memes that simply express a personal opinion, but in the political context. Of course, the “political” meme generates many conflicts with the right to honour and the right to one's own image, and therefore also generates controversies in the sense that it can be used too as a catalyst for hate speech (Shifman, 2014).

Humour is the medium in which the meme is constituted, regardless of its form of adoption, and it is introduced into all of them with more or less creativity. Humour in itself and by its very nature can become transgressive, especially with the feelings and emotions of any Internet user, and on a more legal level with the rules and laws (Cabedo Nebot, 2009).

The meme, due to its symbolic nature, will have sarcastic or ironic humour; in some respects this will channel emotional discourses, and also political ones in some cases, which will provoke ridicule, and in the most extreme cases incite to hatred and violence (Aladro Vico and Jardón Clemente, 2022).

The function of humour in digital memes will explain how some digital communities are formed around a sense of belonging and identity. To do this, humour plays with two factors, the first is the search for originality, and the second is the understanding of the meme's own subculture and digital language (Glitsos & Hall, 2020).

Humour allows, from a cognitive point of view, to contemplate and interpret reality in a different way from the normative and social prescription, however, it can also be a stronghold for extreme ideologies and subversive behaviours. In fact, the cohesive function of the humour inscribed in memes coheres and progressively narrows already established digital communities (Aladro Vico & Jardón Clemente, 2022).

#### **4. The current problem of addressing hate speech on social networks**

The spread of hate is well established in cyberspace since the Internet and social networks have become instruments of hate speech, this leads to behaviours that include threats, insults, and incitement to violence, among others. One of the most common insults that can be found on social networks is the one that takes place through memes, the modus operandi is to make comments that are thoughtless and that appeal to emotions. Unfortunately, the proliferation of these hate messages has been trivialized, and, in general, their importance is downplayed when they appear (Cantillo & Gil Quintana, 2018).

Memes are powerful since social networks are based on the visual element, many of these images focus on promoting negative stereotypes and prejudices, for example, in cases of xenophobia or racism, if it is a mockery of a public figure the meme will accompany your own personal image accompanied by a text.

Sometimes the trigger in the creation of a hate meme is a specific event, for example, when a terrorist attack occurs, a wave of hate expressions on the Internet usually follows right after. This is because the digital reaction is immediate, and the circulation of these memes occurs in different media, not only on social networks, but also in instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp (Julbany and Roiha, 2018).

Women have become another target that has gained weight in recent times has been women. On social networks such as Instagram, a multitude of images and memes have been detected based on the supposed superiority of men over women, some of them also promoting discrimination and gender violence (Miranda et al, 2022).

##### **4.1. Main difficulties pursuing and detecting hate speech through memes**

Aside from the obvious problem of the “internationality” of the Internet, which raises discussions about the jurisdiction of the acts that make it difficult to identify the criminals (not necessarily the original creators of the meme), the main obstacles are: firstly, the low willingness of Internet users to report and, secondly, the underestimation of the events that occur (Aguilar García et al 2015).

There are not usually many police or judicial investigations into memes, and even when effort and commitment is dedicated to investigating possible cases, it must be demonstrated that the meme actually contains a sufficient message to be classified as hate speech. There is still a lot of ignorance in some sectors not only regarding the criminal figures that take place on social networks, but also regarding these new cybercultural elements such as memes, which are highly underestimated as a criminal element (Cabo Isasi & García Juanatey, 2016).

An effective strategy for detecting hate speech in a meme is, in the first phase, to analyse the phenomenon completely, that is, to detect who the authors are and in which social networks they act most frequently. In a second phase, check if there are scales within the types of hatred they manifest

(the first bias should be whether the meme focuses on an individual or a group), and what are the effects it produces on its victims or even on other users who are not the meme main objective (Das et al, 2020).

Although new technologies continue to advance and develop, there is currently still a technical impossibility for a computer program to detect hate speech. There are three major obstacles: the first is conceptual, since it would be necessary to clearly define what is and what is not hate speech; the second is the difficulty of monitoring the vast cyberspace; and thirdly by the type of meme (as has been noted, there are from the simplest to the most complex that can incorporate video and sound).

The main social networks such as X (Twitter) or Facebook have already configured some algorithms as they have many more resources, but, however, many mistakes continue to be made in this detection. Sometimes, the possible success in stopping this spread will occur once the meme has already taken place, but its viralization has been stopped and its message has been prevented from taking hold (Cabo Isasi & García Juanatey, 2016).

#### **4.2. Strategies to fight hate speech**

Being consistent with the importance of the presence of hate speech in these graphic expressions, the fight against digital violence and hatred by society is developed from two different perspectives:

The first, by citizens and organizations that are increasingly putting effective pressure on digital companies to combat hate speech more actively and to be clearer in the tools they use to tackle these conflicts (Gagliardone et al, 2015).

The second, on the part of public administrations, which will have to be up to par and adapt both national and international legislation as new complexities develop, while also forcing these web platforms and social networks to comply with legislation (Cabo Isasi & García Juanatey, 2016).

Furthermore, it is necessary that there be awareness-raising campaigns that help and teach citizens to be aware of these conflicts and to know how to act if they find themselves in the role of victims. In the case of hate speech, those campaigns that also inform about discriminatory behaviour and focus on the social groups that are most sensitive (immigration, LGBT community, etc.) are very effective (Lee et al, 2021).

Young people are the main users of social networks and, therefore, they are also the main creators of multitudes of memes and, for all this, an education in respect for human rights and training for a critical but also well reflective conscience is necessary since childhood. One of the most effective strategies to stop hate speech is prevention. Therefore, it is considered a success if the creator of a meme that contains racist elements makes a self-critical reflection before spreading it on the networks and then refrains from doing so (Benet Oriol et al, 2019).

### **5. Memes and their relationship with politics**

Propaganda is not a new tool; historically, this form of communication has been used to manipulate beliefs and influence the actions of other people through the use of symbols. Language also plays a huge role, along with the use of euphemisms and creating a need for urgency. There are several examples in history in which we can fit certain examples of the style through slogans and symbols, for example during the period of the 1940s in Nazi Germany or in the period of the Cold War (Blackmore, 1999).

It is true that that regarding the use of memes in the digital reality, far-right ideological movements currents have much more efficient strategies to control specific Internet communities and to spread messages of hate or misinformation. As will be analysed later, these trends became especially acute since 2016 with the start of Donald Trump's political campaign, as will be analyzed later.

There is an interesting connection of political memes with the ancient political emblems that were used in apast times, since the message contained was enigmatic and could only be identified if the recipient was competent enough to understand the allegory. Emblems have different levels of understanding depending on the recipient. Many times, this competence depended on whether the recipient was educated enough or whether it was his field of study. Something similar happens with memes, sometimes ancient references are mixed with modern ones, but not all of the target audience can understand them (Luna Quintana, 2023).

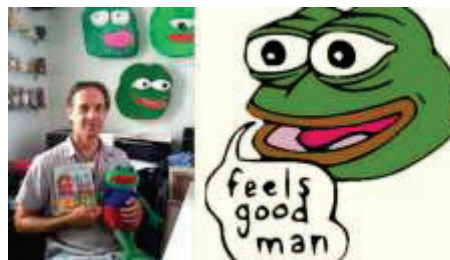
In this sense, we must keep in mind that the climate of opinion is only a fragment of the great process of public opinion formation. By allowing the various opinions developed within public opinion to be

perceived, it favours social stabilization and the legitimization of a discourse. Therefore, this process unfortunately tends towards strong opinions responding to traditional power groups, and therefore, the climate of general opinion also becomes a reflection of that social integration in which there are predominant tendencies and more hidden tendencies. It is in this breeding ground where memes from extreme sectors crystallize (Céspedes, 2020).

### 5.1. How a caricature become a hate symbol. “Pepe the Frog” in Donald Trump’s election campaign

Paradigmatic is the meme called “Pepe the Frog”, a caricature created by comedian Matt Furie, who never imagined that it would become a symbol of hate. The cartoon originated in 2005 in some comics, but gained great importance in 2016.

Figure 1. Matt Furie, creator of “Pepe the Frog”



Source(s): CBC RADIO, 2016.

Being one of the most studied memes in recent years, this cartoon originally had purely humorous connotations, but over time has become (especially in the United States) a symbol of political groups linked to the radical right and supremacism. The culmination of the identification of this meme with these groups was its direct use in Donald Trump's presidential campaign (Glitsos & Hall, 2020).

In the months prior to the 2016 US elections, the “Great Meme War” took place, one of the objectives of these movements was to recover the cartoon character and subject of the Pepe the Frog meme and adopt him as a symbol of their movement and used racist, anti-Semitic or intolerant content in their memes.

Over time, Pepe became associated with far-right extremist views and its use in mainstream culture became increasingly taboo. Finally, in 2016, the Anti-Defamation League designated Pepe as a hate symbol, which was celebrated by the far right. Not only did they get a new pet that was unusable for the rest, but they also showed them how arbitrary and exaggerated the accusations of racism were (Berger, 2018).

Figure 2. “Pepe the Frog’s” meme used by Donald Trump on Twitter/X



Source(s): BBC, 2016.

Since the failed election of Donald Trump, this meme has been recurring again; in the assault on the United States Capitol in January 2021, the Pepe the Frog once again spread as a symbol on Twitter to agitate said event. It was from that moment that companies like Facebook and Twitter began to regulate



user-generated content, Donald Trump himself was expelled from Twitter. However, far-right content has overcome the changes by adapting with new strategies and using apparently harmless memes to communicate hate messages, avoiding security algorithms (Kasimov et al, 2023).

Another point to highlight is the synergy that occurs between social networks, there are less well-known social networks (that are no less populated) such as 4chan, which serve to create links and strategies, and others much better known such as X (Twitter) that are made up of a battlefield in which these hate messages are spread (Knapp, 2023).

The Pepe the Frog meme and his relationship with Trump, taking into account the imminent US elections, serves as a very good example to analyze the dynamics of the transformation and concealment of hatred in a cartoon. In addition, a series of common characteristics that are similar in other countries can be analyzed, the figure of the hero, the villain and the victims, how they are criticized using social networks and contexts. All under a parameter of humour and satire, in which some characters are glorified and others are vilified (Sharma et al, 2022).

## ***5.2. The strategy of using hate memes to your advantage. The case of the insults to Pedro Sánchez***

Since Spanish President Pedro Sánchez assumed the presidency of the Government, there have been many nicknames that his detractors have used to try to ridicule him. One that has had the deepest impact has been that of "Perro Sánchez", or its variant "Perro Sanxe". In the case of this nickname, and although its exact origin is somewhat uncertain, it has been used on websites such as X (Twitter) and other forums even long before Sánchez become elected, although over the years it has come to become more popular<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, the curious thing is that today it has become a transversal nickname, and even some supporters of the president use it in a friendly way. Re-signifying an alias that originally had rather negative connotations, the meme, far from being used to criticize the president, is now used sometimes to speak well of him.

On X (Twitter) there are also vestiges of the early uses of the nickname, such as a parody account from 2016. In reality, it is a very simple word game, in which you only have to change one letter, so it would be logical that it would have occurred of it to different people over time. However, the use of the nickname skyrocketed after Sánchez became president. More and more memes began to emerge with this name, and it was used in videos that went viral. A video game created by the Socialist Youth was even made using the example meme (Ruiz Anderson, 2023).

**Figure 3.** Perro Sánchez's Online Video Game



Source(s): López, A. <https://view.genial.ly>. 2023.

Memes of this style that last over time also go through several phases of development, firstly the "debut" of the meme is influenced by cultural and situational aspects (such as an electoral campaign or a media person). This phase is followed by a capture period in which the meme can follow two paths,

<sup>1</sup> The meme's structure lies in a word game between the president's name (Pedro) with the word "dog" ("perro" in spanish).

disappear or settle. In this case, by taking the second route, it acquires a level of transcendence that prevails not only on the Internet but also on television and other media (Mitman & Denham, 2024).

The left-wing politics, and more specifically the PSOE itself, has ended up picking up the gauntlet and re-signifying the nickname with a positive or even heroic interpretation of the nickname itself. After years in which the president's detractors have used "Perro Sánchez" to shape their attacks on him, now the socialist leader's allies are trying to turn the nickname around.

Sánchez himself, although not long ago he said in interviews that "it is not pleasant" to be referred to with names like "Perro Sánchez", highlighted that "it is an experience that has been turned around," and that even he loves the meme which says that of "the sanxe dog knows more for being a dog than for being sanxe."

In the last electoral campaign in summer of 2023, those who create the most Perro Sánchez memes and jokes are the socialists themselves and their allies, and the hashtag #PerroSanxe was trending on Twitter those days. In short, it is a curious story of how an insult has ended up becoming a friendly and transversal nickname, which is something worthy of merit (Viejo, 2023).

**Figure 4.** Pedro Sánchez's meme used by his own political party account in Twitter/X



Source(s): Pérez, J. in Antena 3, 2023.

This particular case shows how the success of the dissemination of memes depends on different factors such as the creativity of the irony or parody, and also who the protagonist of the meme is. In these cases, memes even have the capacity to adapt and give way to imitation or re-edition in different formats. Also, this is the ideal example on how fight a meme that collides between humour and hate, using it in to your advantage instead of trying to ban it (González Hernández et al, 2019).

## 6. Conclusions

An analysis has been carried out pointing out the main characteristics of memes, these elements of digital communication that stand out for their symbology, their originality and their creativity, and also indicating their function as a new language within the Internet that transmits new cultural currents.

The meme is used by Internet users to participate in an interactive sense with others, these are transformed and spread according to the small and large communities that are increasingly growing and expanding in this new cyberculture. They are characteristic of social networks and flood them with images and other identity symbols, however, these require a certain effort to be understood, since, sometimes, their significance goes far beyond what they let on.

With the excuse of humour, very powerful destructive hate messages can circulate; under the guise of irony or sarcasm, transgressions are camouflaged and reinforced. These attacks in the form of humour also belong to memes and make up an ideal breeding ground for spreading these messages.

The meme is really a phenomenon of new technologies, and as such it is relevant and difficult to deal with, and especially when it generates conflicts it and needs to be regulated. It is characteristic of the meme that each individual who receives it can modify it at will and spread it with new characteristics.

Therefore, there are two problems: the first is identifying the meme as an element that violates the laws; and the second is to define the responsibility of the person who spread it. The visceral message of memes remains valid over time and in the reach of social networks.

There is concern about how widespread hate speech is, however, the concept of hate itself is discussed by doctrine, making it difficult to establish legal foundations, especially at the international level. There is a consensus regarding the messages that incite discrimination and racism, also those referring to sexual orientation that generate prejudice. On the other hand, there are messages that focus on individuals such as public figures, which are revealed in the form of a threat or cyberbullying.

Among all the areas that use memes as tools, their use in politics has been highlighted; it has been seen that there is a tendency of consolidation by ideology on the extreme right to spread this type of memes and spread the message of hate.

It is true that there are also peaks of intensity in the creation of these memes during electoral periods, at an international level it has been seen with the 2020 presidential elections with Donald Trump and in the upcoming 2024 elections. At a national level, each country has its own idiosyncrasies. In the Spanish case, the use of memes around the figure of the President of the Spanish Government Pedro Sánchez stands out.

Tackling the problem is complicated by the conflict it may entail with other rights such as freedom of expression, and the jurisprudence developed specifically on memes is quite scarce, at least as far as Spain is concerned.

It is necessary to continue creating educational strategies and campaigns based on awareness and prevention, and an investment of resources is also essential to continue developing technologies and technical resources capable of helping in the detection of hate speech. Everything always in harmony and with absolute respect for the right to freedom of expression and other fundamental rights.

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