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Memes as a factor of manipulations: transformation of image through mass culture

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The article studies the phenomenon of political memes as a powerful tool for influencing public opinion and politicians' ratings. The authors analyse the role of memes in grounding images of political leaders, in particular, using examples from the Ukrainian and American political contexts. It views how memes can influence the perception of politicians, changing their perception by society. In Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko became an object of numerous memes, which were mostly aimed at criticising his political activities and inefficiency, which, in turn, reduced his rating among voters. At the same time, memes around Yulia Tymoshenko became a mechanism for popularising her image among young people, reinforcing the image of a leader capable of change.

The authors pay particular attention to the case of the US, where during the 2024 presidential campaign, the team of Kamala Harris deliberately used memes to attract a youth audience. This allowed to form an informal and emotionally close image of the politician, who became more accessible to young people. This approach helped Kamala Harris gain support among this segment of voters, creating an impression that she understands their needs and aspirations.

Analysing memes about Melania Trump, the authors emphasise their role in public criticism of her activities as the First Lady. Memes that ridiculed her public image became a way to express dissatisfaction and disagreement with her political views and public behaviour. The memes in this context turned out to be a tool for expressing criticism that had no other forms of showing in traditional media.

The article also raises the issue of the risks of using memes in political strategy, since memes can both strengthen political support and damage the reputation by distorting the image of a politician. It separately analyses how memes can become an effective tool for mobilising electoral support, especially among a youth audience, but also emphasises the need for caution when using memes as a part of election campaigns.

Thus, the authors emphasise that political memes have become a powerful tool not only for manipulating public opinion, but also for forming political narratives that can influence the social and political atmosphere.

Keywords*: meme; political meme; political discourse; information space; social networks; public opinion; communication; visual humour.*

МЕМИ ЯК ЧИННИК МАНІПУЛЯЦІЙ: ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ ОБРАЗУ ЧЕРЕЗ МАСОВУ КУЛЬТУРУ

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У статті досліджується феномен політичного мему як потужного інструмента впливу на громадську думку та рейтинги політиків. Автори аналізують роль мемів у формуванні образів політичних лідерів, зокрема на прикладах українського та американського політичних контекстів. Розглянуто, як меми можуть впливати на сприйняття політиків, змінюючи їхнє сприйняття суспільством. В Україні Петро Порошенко став об'єктом численних мемів, які здебільшого були спрямовані на критику його політичної діяльності та неефективності, що, своєю чергою, знижувало його рейтинг серед виборців. Водночас меми навколо Юлії Тимошенко стали механізмом для популяризації її образу серед молоді, підсилюючи імідж лідера, здатного до змін.

Особливу увагу автори приділяють ситуації у США, де під час президентської кампанії 2024 року команда Камали Гарріс свідомо використовувала меми для залучення молодіжної аудиторії. Це дозволило створити неформальний та емоційно близький образ політика, який став більш доступним для молоді. Такий підхід допоміг Камалі Гарріс здобути підтримку серед цього сегмента виборців, створивши враження, що вона розуміє їхні потреби та прагнення.

Аналізуючи меми про Меланію Трамп, автори акцентують на їхній ролі в суспільній критиці її діяльності як першої леді. Меми, що висміювали її публічний імідж, стали способом вираження незадоволення та незгоди з її політичними поглядами та публічною поведінкою. Мем в цьому контексті виявився інструментом для вираження критики, яка не мала інших форм відображення в традиційних медіа.

У статті також порушується питання ризиків використання мемів у політичній стратегії, оскільки меми здатні і підсилювати політичну підтримку, і завдавати шкоди репутації, спотворюючи образ політика. Окремо аналізується, як меми можуть стати ефективним інструментом мобілізації електоральної підтримки, особливо серед молодіжної аудиторії, однак також підкреслюється потреба в обережності використанні мемів як частини передвиборчих кампаній.

Отже, автори підкреслюють, що політичні меми стали потужним інструментом не лише для маніпуляції громадською думкою, а й формування політичних наративів, що здатні впливати на соціальну та політичну атмосферу.

Ключові слова*: мем; політичний мем; політичний дискурс; інформаційний простір; соціальні мережі; громадська думка; комунікація; візуальний гумор.*

The relevance of the problem

In the digital age, memes instantly spread through social and other online media, reaching a large audience and shaping public sentiment. Society uses memes to express its attitude to various events, including political decisions or personalities. Often, this form of presenting information is closer and clearer than traditional analysis. For society, memes simplify complex political topics, making them accessible to a wider audience, often through irony, sarcasm or hyperbole. The popularity of political memes is growing not only in Ukraine, but also around the world — from the US elections to the protests in France, memes have become part of the political landscape.

The problem statement

It is difficult to determine the exact moment a meme was first created in political context. It is believed that the first political meme in its traditional meaning is the US President George W. Bush's slip of the tongue. This happened in 2001. Although, similar phenomena existed before. Satirical illustrations have been common in American publications since the 18th century. However, given that the term "meme" was only coined in 1976, it is difficult to classify anything that appeared before that as a meme.

In Ukraine, the political meme emerged with the beginning of our state's independence. One of the first political figures of independent Ukraine, who can be considered a source of popular statements that acquired the characteristics of memes, was Ivan Plyushch, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in 1991–1994. His emotional and colourful remarks, uttered during parliamentary sessions, quickly spread among the people and the media (*Naikrashchi tsytaty Ivana Pliushcha*, 2014).

George H. W. Bush's speech, delivered in Kyiv on August 1, 1991, is considered by Ukrainians to be the first example of the American political meme. In his speech, the American president spoke out against the Ukrainian SSR leaving the USSR, warning Ukrainians against "suicidal nationalism". Given that the Soviet Union was literally falling apart, and that a coup d'état had taken place in Moscow just 18 days after Bush's visit to Kyiv, this speech was received mostly negatively. After Ukraine declared independence on August 24, 1991, The New York Times columnist William Safire called Bush's speech "Chicken Kyiv" in his column, and this expression stuck with the speech in the mass consciousness. In 2005, the author of the speech, Condoleezza Rice, explained that in 1991, the peaceful collapse of the USSR, given its nuclear arsenal, did not seem obvious, so the US administration sought to minimise the risks. Today, the phrase "Chicken Kyiv" is often used to refer to any offers by American politicians that contradict the interests of Ukraine (Safire, 2004).

The State of problem studying

The concept of a meme first appears in the work "The Selfish Gene" by R. Dawkins (2017) in 1976. In general, various scientists have studied this phenomenon. In particular, Ya. Chaplak and H. Chuiko (2022), T. Reime (n.d.) focused on the meme as a tool of social communication. As part of meme journalism, O. Dziubina (2016), A. Riazanov (2018), T. Poda (2017) have studied memes. Particularly, O. Dziubina (2016) offered a classification of text memes, which are one of the categories according to the classification by format. In general, meme theory is a difficult subject to study, since memes are a constantly changing phenomenon, the development of which depends on many factors. In our study, we relied on the research of M. Bulakh (2019), R. Dawkins (2017), I. Mudra (2023), O. Dziubina (2016), T. Deshpande and N. Mani (2021).

Unresolved issues

The meme phenomenon is often considered exclusively entertaining, therefore it is weakly associated with influence, politics, or full-scale war, but this is not at all the case. Moreover, in the Ukrainian context, modern memes still remain poorly researched and meme culture is taking on new forms and development. In the study, we will try to demonstrate how political memes affect politicians' ratings.

The research tasks of our study are to demonstrate how memes influenced the ratings of Ukrainian politicians and what significance they had during the 2024 US presidential election.

The main material

Ukrainian political memes are impressive in their quantity and diversity, but there is another aspect to consider — influence. And it really exists.

For example, as of 2024, memes related to Viktor Yanukovych or Mykola Azarov are still popular on social networks. The former Prime Minister reappeared in social media after the start of the Defense Forces operation in the Kursk region. Then, under one of the videos about how local residents need to learn Ukrainian, one of the users asked how to say "monetka" (a coin) correctly in Ukrainian, to which he was answered "minetka". Because of this, the phenomenon of "azirivka," that is, the terrible distortion of the Ukrainian language that Mykola Azarov once practiced, has become popular again. It has also been picked up by large businesses and corporations, who have posted videos about their companies on their social networks with "azirivka".

The main caveat in these stories is that memes bring back visibility to politicians who are actually criminals and under investigation. Instead, in

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memes they can appear as just funny men, which can threaten to whitewash their image.

However, the most telling story of the negative influence of memes on political ratings is Petro Poroshenko. In the first round of the 2019 elections, he received 15.95 percent of the votes. As of March 2024, according to surveys conducted by the sociological group SOCIS on behalf of the Censor.Net publication, 6.4 percent of Ukrainians who would go and vote, would vote for Petro Poroshenko. The politician's overall rating is 4.8 percent, which is almost 50 percent lower than the level of support in the 2014 elections (Rusinko, 2024).

Memes about Petro Poroshenko became especially popular after Volodymyr Zelenskyy won the election, although even during the election race, the candidates' debates became memes. First, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address challenging the then-incumbent President to a debate, which he ended with the words: "Think you all" ("Think" was one of Poroshenko's campaign slogans.) Then Poroshenko's response, "If stadium then stadium," became a meme. Although later the beginning of Petro Poroshenko's video response also became a meme.

After Volodymyr Zelenskyy became a President, Petro Poroshenko chose a strategy of emphasising the achievements of his term. He did this so often that the very words "presidency term" became a meme. The culmination of the ridicule of these statements was the joke that "Zelensky became president during Poroshenko's term", which, of course, influenced the perception of the politician by the young audience.

Before the full-scale invasion, two more memes featuring the 5th President gained immense popularity. The first was during celebrations marking the 30th anniversary of the restoration of Independence. Petro Poroshenko and Viktor Yushchenko, who were sitting next to each other, exchanged a few words, after which both got up from their chairs. This episode caused a wave of memes, with netisens guessing what Petro Poroshenko had offered Viktor Yushchenko that made them both decide to leave the celebrations.

Another meme went viral. In late October 2021, Poroshenko shared photos on social media of himself and his wife showing off mushrooms they had picked in the forest. However, the photo of Petro Poroshenko with a knife instantly became a meme. The most popular was this photo with the caption "There will be no peaceful solution" (sometimes — "Peaceful Roshen", from the name of the chocolate factory that is also word play in Ukrainian "rishennya"–"roshenu").

But it's interesting that Petro Poroshenko sees all these memes and at the end of 2021 shared his favorites on social media, including the ones mentioned above.

Still, such a number of memes led to the fact that the politician's active volunteer activities with the beginning of the full-scale invasion were not taken seriously by young people at all — almost every video about the assistance provided was either ridiculed in the comments or turned into memes. For example: "What do you see in front of you? This is a treasure". This is what Petro Poroshenko said about the equipment purchased in 2022. This phrase became a popular meme in almost no time.

One way or another, memes seriously contributed to the decline in the political ratings of the 5th President, as many people stopped taking him seriously due to the image created by memes.

However, in 2024, Petro Poroshenko lost his status as the politician who is the most memed about. His place was taken by Yulia Tymoshenko. The reason for this was initially that Internet users were amused by the conversational videos of the MP, since she has a rather specific accent — in most words, instead of soft "g" (something between "g" and "h"), she pronounces a hard "g", instead of "o" — "a", and instead of "I" — "y". Thus, for example, the word "money" in her performance sounds like "pennies". An excerpt from her interview 5 years ago, which the politician gave on the eve of the presidential election, became especially popular in 2024. The presidential candidate decided to explain why the Armed Forces of Ukraine need a woman as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, since according to the Constitution of Ukraine, it is the head of state who heads its army. Then Yulia Tymoshenko used the phrase "female commander-in-chief" with several sounds distorted. This is often what she is now called online, and this phrase has become one of the iconic memes that partially modifies her image in politics, making her a symbol that goes beyond politics. Her phrase becomes universal, no longer symbolising a specific political statement, but rather a part of popular culture, accessible to a wide audience that may not even be familiar with her work. Thus, this meme illustrates how a politician's personality can become a generalized symbol.

Bloggers have given new life to all existing memes about Yulia Tymoshenko, based on the politician's statements or behavior. Two of them are worthy to be noted here. A cover of Lady Gaga's song "Bad Romance" performed by Yulia Tymoshenko with new lyrics and a corresponding video sequence appeared on the Monrote YouTube channel, hosted by musician Oleksii Bovsunovskyi. The video quickly became popular and, as of early November 2024, had collected 822 thousand views. The accent in this cover was the word "atomne" (nuclear), which Yulia Tymoshenko pronounces with a specific accent. Given the above-mentioned jokes about nuclear weapons and the threat of their use, the joke about "atomne" grew into the

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context of nuclear weapons, and not nuclear energy, which the politician was explaining.

In June 2024, a cover of Alona Alona & Jerry Heil's song "Teresa&Maria" appeared on the same channel, with which the singers represented Ukraine at the Eurovision Song Contest 2024 in the Swedish city of Malmö and took 3rd place. The popular version of the song was called "Mama Atamne" as an allusion to the fact that the original mentions Mother Teresa. This clip was less successful on YouTube and had 302 thousand views as of early November, but it went viral on social networks.

The popularity of memes is also added by the author under the pseudonym Mark Reudit. It is known that the guy is 21 years old and comes from the city of Dnipro. He created parody accounts of Yulia Tymoshenko on Tik Tok and Telegram. The alleged politician's channel on Tik Tok is followed by 36.200 users, and the content there has already collected 3 million likes. Individual videos have several million views. More than 2.400 people have subscribed to the channel on Telegram. It regularly contains content of various kinds using obscene language, slurs, and gender markers. However, it is worth noting that the Telegram channel is not only entertaining, but also informative. For example, as soon as information appeared about the alleged death in a pre-trial detention center of Nestor Shufrych, a people's deputy from the banned OPZH party, subscribers to the channel immediately saw a message on the channel allegedly belonging to Yulia Tymoshenko stating that she allegedly killed the deputy suspected of treason. From this we can conclude that the person who runs this channel actively follows the news.

Transforming Yulia Tymoshenko's persona into a comedic context may contribute to a certain "blurring" of Tymoshenko's image as a serious political figure. When her statement is used in humorous videos, it may reduce the seriousness of her political positions in the eyes of the audience, especially the youth, who perceive her not as a strong political personality, but rather as an entertainment symbol. In this case, the meme has a contradictory effect, increasing her popularity but diverting attention from her specific political ideas and role in state processes.

As for the USA, on November 5, 2024, the next presidential election was held in the USA, which was preceded by a dramatic election campaign. After the first debate between incumbent President Joseph Biden and his rival and former President Donald Trump, the White House president's position has significantly shaken — his lack of conviction and certainly not young age caused the rating of the main contender for the Democratic Party's presidency to drop. So, in July 2024, Biden withdrew from the election and instead supported the candidacy of Vice President Kamala Harris.

The new team of the candidate Kamala Harris's immediately began an active work with young people through memes. One of the first elements that helped Kamala Harris gain recognition among the youth community was her phrase "You exist in context", as well as the metaphor "coconut tree". These expressions quickly became popular on TikTok, where users created remixes and accompanied the videos with palm tree and coconut emojis. Thus, the viral spread of these words demonstrated how even phrases from formal speech can be adapted to an informal context and resonate with young people (Kravtsov, 2024). The Harris campaign exploited this fact, engaging a young audience on an emotional level through humor and a "meme" style of communication. And it worked, because from what many experts predicted was a "weak candidate", Kamala Harris suddenly became a serious rival to Donald Trump.

The memes that gained popularity helped to create an image of Kamala Harris as a politician close to young people. This was particularly the case through the use of quotes such as "Do you think I just fell out of a coconut tree?" in response to serious questions; or her answers to Donald Trump in the debates; or simply her facial expression in response to her opponent's words showed her in an informal light, which reinforced the perception of Kamala Harris as a candidate who understands young people and can speak to them in a language they understand.

The team of Kamala Harris skillfully used specific youth humor, which was manifested not only in viral videos with memes, but also in formal updates to the campaign pages. For example, the slogan "Providing context" on her social media profile echoed her phrase about context and was consistent with the style of youth humor, where short and concise phrases were key rather than formal political slogans. Such a language encouraged youth to engage in discussion and actively support the candidate in the election, because they perceived her as someone close to their culture.

The integration of the image of Kamala Harris into American singer Charli XCX's popular album "Brat", which in 2024 became one of the most popular in the world with a simple design and bright colors on a green background, was a successful example of trendy political branding. With this trend, the US vice president's team showed that they were "in the loop" with youth culture, which reduced the distance between them and young voters. Updating her profile identity to this style symbolized the flexibility of Harris' team, which sought to remain relevant and constantly take into account new trends that resonated with young people.

The team of Kamala Harris didn't just use memes. They created a psychologically comfortable environment in which young people could identify with her. Popular moments from her life and quotes that became memes on

TikTok allowed young people to feel an emotional closeness to her, which seemed to make her a part of their company. The emotional connection with a political figure through humor and memes stimulated the desire of young people to support her in real elections, because for them it became a part of their social life and even self-expression. Moreover, we are not talking only about American youth. Everyone who was in the context of the memes expressed their hopes for the victory of Kamala Harris.

When Kamala Harris and her team made jokes about themselves, especially using the word "Brat" or her "coconut tree" moments, it reduced tension and added lightness to her image. Young people responded positively to such self-mockery because it made Harris more human and relatable to this segment of potential voters. The meme image of a candidate who was not afraid to laugh at himself and did not put himself on a "pedestal" created the feeling that the politician was not alienated from the everyday experiences of young people.

Harris' team adapted content for different social platforms. While TikTok focused on humor and memes that appealed to young people, Social Network X targeted people interested in politics, regardless of age. This targeting allowed her to reach a broader audience and focused on TikTok as a platform for engaging younger voters. It allowed Harris to build a stronger, more contemporary image as a politician that was accessible to everyone through the appropriate format.

The interactivity with which young people responded to memes allowed Harris' campaign to not only increase the visibility of her image but also generate interest in the election. Memes became a means of mobilisation because they created an informal environment where young people could express themselves and at the same time feel as a part of the political process. When memes became part of a political campaign, young people perceived the elections as something closer to them, which prompted them to think about voting.

Kamala Harris campaign's meme strategy was an innovative attempt to engage young voters through modern platforms and trends, including TikTok. The meme strategy helped her create an informal and engaging image of a politician who understands the language of Gen Z and is able to interact with young people on their level. Although Harris failed to win the presidential election, this strategy demonstrated the power of informal communication in modern political campaigns and confirmed that humor, irony, and the ability to adapt to popular tendencies can positively affect a candidate's image among young people.

The election results showed that, despite the support of a youth audience, memes and informal identities were not enough to win. This suggests that successful political promotion requires a comprehensive

approach that encompasses not only virtual interaction with voters, but also deep substantive policy proposals and support in broader demographic groups.

After Donald Trump's election victory, a new meme gained popularity on social media, but it no longer concerned the newly elected president, but his wife Melania.

The image of Melania, who reluctantly fulfills the duties of first lady, is becoming a means of expressing public skepticism about the political system in which Trump was able to return to power. Her ironic phrase from a leaked phone conversation during Donald Trump's previous term from 2017 to 2021, "Who gives a f**k about Christmas stuff and decoration, but I need to do it, right?" reflects that people are tired of certain formal aspects of public policy that force them to act against their own wishes. The meme emphasises Melania's attitude towards forced duties and her own dissatisfaction, which is associated with a significant part of society that may not support Trum's policies (Yusif, 2024).

The trend with the hashtag #SaveMelania has become a kind of protest, ironically hinting that even those closest to Trump may not support his ideals. This meme and hashtag serve as a way for society to humorously condemn his political ambitions through the image of Melania, who many believe is a "forced participant" in his political game. It supports an alternative narrative where even the First Lady may not want to associate herself with a Trump presidency.

Memes based on Melania's phrases not only criticise the political system, but also contribute to the formation of her image as a First Lady without political ambitions. The public perception of Melania is shaped as someone who is supposedly "trapped" in the political scene and only suffers the consequences. This not only makes her closer to ordinary people, but also gives her personality traits of a "rebel" who resists imposed roles.

Leaked recording of Melania's reluctance to decorate the White House for Christmas has become the basis for numerous memes that have resurfaced since Trump's return to office, creating an image of the first lady refusing to conform to society's standard expectations of her role. This sarcastic approach shows that for many people, informality bordering on outright defiance is much more attractive than traditional submission. Such an image can both strengthen sympathy for Melania and at the same time reduce respect for her husband as a leader.

The meme forms an ironic contrast to the traditional role of a first lady, who usually supports her husband and helps strengthen his image. In this case, Melania's image is transformed into one of neglecting her duties, which may undermine traditional notions of the first lady's role as a sup-

portive figure. Moreover, this meme could increase the alienation of some voters from power and make Trump's presidency even more controversial, as Melania's detachment creates a sense of instability and discord at the very political centre.

Melania's outspoken criticism, even in the form of sarcasm and jokes, indirectly affects Trump's reputation. When the meme hints at her frustration and reluctance to participate in political events, it demonstrates that even those closest to the president can have different values and desires. Such irony could convince some voters that Trump has limited support even among his own family, potentially reducing his authority and support among the public.

The "Save Melania" meme following Donald Trump's return to the presidency has not only been entertaining, but also has strong political overtones. It reinforces the ironic perception of the role of first lady, demonstrates Melania's disagreement with the responsibilities of the presidency, and creates her image as a "disgruntled figure". This not only increases her popularity as someone who criticizes her own status, but also potentially weakens Donald Trump's support among his opponents and even some voters.

Ultimately, such a meme could negatively impact the reputation of both figures, portraying Trump as a leader whose inner circle, represented by his wife, does not support him, and shaping the image of Melania as a first lady who allegedly does not want to fulfill her duties.

Conclusions. Memes can be considered as a means of recording public sentiment in the context of reactions to certain events, and thus they become markers of public opinion. This also plays a significant role in the political life of the country.

Ukrainian political memes have long been a well-known genre due to the number of actions and phrases from Ukrainian politicians. However, the stories of Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko in the context of a political meme are reflections of two opposite things that a meme can lead to — the destruction of political ratings and the increase in popularity. If memes added political points to Yulia Tymoshenko and increased her popularity among young people, then all of Petro Poroshenko's activities are turning into memes and any attempts to improve his political ratings end in failure. And this is an exceptional story, because the teams of none of these politicians are involved in the creation and distribution of these memes.

In Ukraine, no politicians have yet used memes as a part of their election strategies, but there is such experience in the United States, as presidential candidate Kamala Harris actively used memes to attract the votes of a young

audience during her campaign. Although she did not win the elections, the very fact of using such a strategy may indicate its potential in political campaigns. It cannot be ruled out that this experience will not be adopted by Ukrainian politicians in the following elections. So, studying this experience is important precisely from this perspective.

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