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When 'Weird' Means 'Dangerous': Viruses and Firewalls in Affective Polarization

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WHEN 'WEIRD' MEANS 'DANGEROUS': VIRUSES AND FIREWALLS IN
AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
Communication

by
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Accepted by:
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PLAIN LANGUAGE ABSTRACT

In the 2024 election, the term "weird" became a popular way to describe Donald Trump and his supporters. This study looks at how this term spread and how different ideological groups reacted to it, using a method called Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). By examining discussions on two Reddit communities (r/WeirdGOP and r/AskTrumpSupporters), this thesis explores how people used "weird" to shape their views of Trump and his followers.

This research found that "weird" was initially used to describe Trump himself, replacing terms like "fascist" and "authoritarian." However, over time, the focus shifted to describing primarily his supporters as "weird." This shift may suggest that the term adapted to stay relevant and continue spreading. On the other hand, Trump supporters universally rejected the "weird" label, using counteraccusations of "weirdness" and redefining the term to defend their views.

This research shows how political language can spread like a virus, changing and adapting to stay effective. It centers the role of online platforms in shaping political discussions and the importance of understanding how different groups respond to political messages. The findings suggest that future studies should look at how political terms evolve over time and how they influence public opinion and political behavior.

ABSTRACT

As traditional sources of epistemic authority face declining trust, alternative narratives have gained prominence - often leveraging the emotional and cultural resonance of seemingly simple terms. In the 2024 election cycle, the term “weird” emerged as a potent meme in American political discourse. Using a memetic perspective that incorporates elements of framing theory and Social Judgment Theory, this thesis investigates the use and reaction to “weird” and its role in shaping perception of Donald Trump, his political allies, his followers, and his opposition during and immediately after the 2024 Presidential election. The memetic perspective, which views ideas as units of cultural transmission that spread and evolve, provides a unique lens to understand how affective political language becomes ‘viral.’ By examining the interplay between messenger frames and audience reception, this study demonstrates the mechanisms through which “weird” influenced political orientation and public opinion.

This thesis uses Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (Brock, 2018) to analyze content about the frame of Trump and his political allies as “weird” in two separate subreddits – one anti-Trump (r/WeirdGOP) and one pro-Trump (r/AskTrumpSupporters) – allowing for a nuanced understanding of how political narratives are constructed and contested across political divides. This thesis provides a framework for exploring the role of memetic language in contemporary politics. Understanding the dynamics of “weird” provides insights into the evolving nature of political persuasion and the challenges facing democratic discourse in an increasingly polarized society.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
PLAIN LANGUAGE ABSTRACT.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
CHAPTER	
I. PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
The viral/memetic perspective	4
Social Judgment Theory and the “Firewall Effect”	8
Framing and Agenda-Setting	12
III. SYNTHESIS.....	16
IV. METHODOLOGY	18
V. RESULTS	22
r/WeirdGOP	22
r/AskTrumpSupporters	34
VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.....	40
Analysis.....	40
Discussion	45
VII. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	50

Table of Contents (Continued)

	Page
VIII. CONCLUSION.....	50
REFERENCES	54

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1 Response types as coded from r/AskTrumpSupporters	36

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 Frequency of mass media’s usage of <i>weird</i> as related to <i>Trump</i> in 2024	2
2.1 A painting of Trump, depicted as an angel with fiery sword, banishing Joe .. Biden and Kamala Harris from the White House, just as a similarly armed angel in the Bible banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The ... text reads: “Trump-supporting Christians are weird”.....	25
2.2 “Totally normal tattoos for the secretary of defense to have.” The image shows Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, shirtless, with a large crusader cross tattoo over his heart. This tattoo – and the “Deus Vult” tattoo on his bicep – glorify the violence of the Crusades.....	26
2.3 The text provided by the poster says “Is using a straw gay now? Weird”. The image shows FOX reporter Jesse Watters and his words: “Women love masculinity, and women do not love Tim Walz, so that should just tell you about how masculine Tim Walz is. The other day you saw him with a vanilla ice cream shake. Had a straw in it. Again, that tells you everything.”.....	29
2.4 The text provided by the poster says “Weirdos Behave Like This”. The image shows a picture of Tim Walz’ son’s display of emotion at the Democratic National Convention with the commentary: “Tim Walz stupid son crying isn’t the flex the left thinks it is. You raised your kid to be a puffy beta male. Congrats. Does Barron Trump cry? Nope. Does he love his father? Of course. That’s the types of values I want leading the country.”	29
2.5 A short exchange between a supporter of Kamala Harris and a supporter of Donald Trump. The Trump supporter says, “Dudes who vote for Kamala Harris pee sitting down.” The Harris supporter responds: “Dudes who vote for Trump think about how other dudes pee.”	32
2.6 The post reads: “Why do people call MAGA weird? VOTE – EARLY!!!”. The image – possibly generated by artificial intelligence – shows four men dressed only in diapers at a political gathering (wearing diapers was, for a period during the 2024 election season, seen as a show of support for	

List of Figures (Continued)

Figure	Page
Trump, whose apparent reliance on incontinence underwear was pointed out by his political opponents).....	33
2.7 The post reads: “Remember when Trump invited these bozos to speak at the RNC? WEIRD”. The image posted is of Mark and Patricia McCloskey, pointing and waving weapons at Black Lives Matter protestors from their front yard in St. Louis.	33
2.8 This meme shows Donald Trump’s face, whose famous spray-tan leaves noticeable gaps in coverage over his eyes, mouth, and the sides of this face. The text of the meme reads: “This is weird. Why are we all just pretending this is an acceptable way for someone who wants to be the President to present themselves? Are you really okay with him slathering on a full face of orange boot polish every day and then trying to seriously negotiate with other heads of state? He’s a fucking joke.”	34
3.1 The post that links to Fig. 3.2; it says “I swear the left is just one gigantic projection chamber at this point” and as an example says “these people calling everyone weird”. “These” contains a hyperlink to the image on Fig. 3.2.	37
3.2 A collage of nine images, seven of which show gender-nonconforming and/or sexualized images of LGBTQ+ people. Overlaid over each image is one word making up the phrase: “We Will Bring Decency Back To The White House.”	37
4.1 Comparison of GDELT data for frequency in coverage of Trump/Weird (blue) and Trump/Fascist (black) (The GDELT Project, 2025)	43

CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND

For those feeling fear and anxiety, humor is often used as a coping mechanism - particularly as a response to feelings of helplessness (Waller, 2006). Kharchenko (2023), in his examination of Ukrainian humor in the face of Russia's 2014-2016 invasion, draws on Malphurs' (2010) psychological tension relief theory: "people get rid of negative emotions by laughing and smiling" (p. 2). For those Americans living in a state of fear and anxiety since 2015 over the specter of power being given to - in their estimation - an authoritarian demagogue and aspiring fascist, exhaustion and hopelessness were setting in: from the spread of "lies (e.g. 'alternative facts')..." to "the rise of White supremacy, misogyny, violence against Black and Brown people, separation of migrant children, attacks on LGBTQ+ people, assault on disability rights, denial of climate change, and profound loss amidst COVID-19," despair had become "a hallmark of living in the United States" (Tummala-Narra, 2021, p. 127). 'Weird' seemed to emerge out of this defeatist attitude, providing a new "release of the fearful" (Warren, 2006, p. 4) to address ongoing concerns about Trump.

In July of 2024, Tim Walz - then on the short-list to be Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris' running mate - sat for an interview on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*. Answering questions in the plainspoken, conversational style for which he has become known, he said, "...these people are just weird... they're running for 'He-Man Women's Haters' club or something." As the banter between the hosts and Walz continued, he added: "These are weird people on the other side. They want to take books away. They

want to be in your exam room... don't get sugar-coating this, these are weird ideas” (Scarborough & Brzezinski, 2024).

This quip quickly went viral. Within hours of being posted on X (formerly Twitter), the “weird” clip had millions of views, and a new conversation was underway. Democratic strategist Caitlin Legacki noted, “I think it’s really elegant in its simplicity. I think it really reflects a newer way of thinking and campaigning and just calling it what it is” (Taylor, 2024). Ezra Klein (2024) characterized this moment as “the interview heard around the Democratic Party... all of a sudden it was all you heard from Democrats: ‘weird, weird, weird. These guys are weird.’” Walz appeared on numerous talk shows after this, often to discuss the “weirdness” he spoke of and further define it. Kamala Harris adopted the word after this herself, and it began to proliferate *en masse* in [ostensibly] left-wing American media (Nehemas, 2024). There was a marked increase in the use of the word as related to Trump across mass media following this moment, but as time went on it appears to have tapered off (The GDELT Project, 2024):

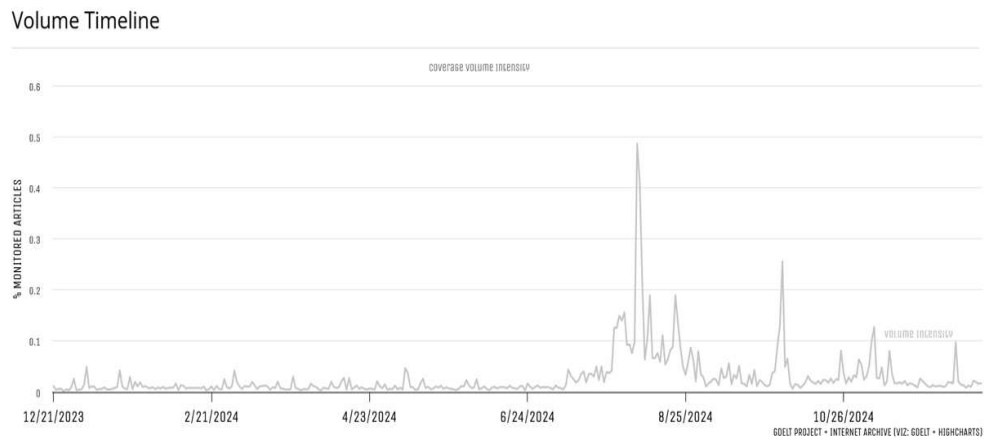


Fig. 1: Frequency of mass media’s usage of *weird* as related to *Trump* in 2024.

A new name for describing things as “weird” in the political context emerged: “weird-checking” (as opposed to fact-checking; Jalbert & Hyman, 2024). This served as a

way for those opposed to Trump and his allies to ridicule him (Hesse, 2024). Instead of referring to violence, prejudice, government monitoring of women's menstrual cycles, or climate change as "dangerous," "fascist," or "authoritarian," these things were now "weird."

Ridicule is a powerful tool because it is compelling enough to spread on its own; it is irrepressible (a political regime may repress the press, but it cannot repress what people say to one another in private); it boosts morale; it undermines the seriousness with which its target wants to be seen; and it cannot be refuted (Warren, 2006, pp. 9-10). The change in the tone of Democratic messaging shortly following the spread of "weird" seems to fit these effects: morale was certainly boosted and at least correlated to the spread of "weird"; the characterization was certainly "viral" in that it was used from social media platforms to Democratic National Convention speeches; it could not be meaningfully attacked as it was based in opinion; and it appears to have caused a significant number of people to shift from fearfully characterizing Trump and his allies as dangerous authoritarians to mirthfully characterizing them as "weirdos." "Weird-checking" is not subject to the same kind of verification that fact-checking is, but instead rests on a socially constructed consensus over what qualifies as "weird" and "normal." "Weird-checking" is an enforcement of social norms, rather than the spread of information; one would not check Trump's words against facts but against norms. An explanation of the rapid diffusion (and subsequent evolution) of this viral meme must begin with an examination of memes.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The viral/memetic perspective

Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the term 'meme' to describe units of cultural transmission, analogous to genes that undergo copying and mutation. These 'memes' - words, phrases, gestures, etc. - are what Bender & Beller (2013) refer to as 'cultural artifacts' (or, as expressed here, cultural constructs). Because the concept of memes originated with Dawkins and were analogous to genes, research on memes was initially conducted mainly by geneticists eager to see if both memes and genes shared the same features. Detailed discussions and mathematical models were created to analyze the “anatomy” of units of cultural selection, but these bore little convincing fruit (Fog, 1999; Aunger, 2008). Those seeking this sort of precision have mostly put this idea aside, but this may be due to taking a simple analogy too literally; since memes are of different sizes and shapes, the “anatomy” and evolution of an image macro (“internet meme”), an entire religion, and a single adjective may require more than one parsimonious model to account for. Nevertheless, memetics itself adapted, migrated, and evolved to survive in other fields such as law (c.f. Fried, 1999), cognitive science (c.f. Schlaile et al., 2018), and strategic communication (c.f. Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2023). At present, memetics is studied almost exclusively in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2023; Aunger, 2008).

Much of the reason for this is that the term “meme” has become colloquially synonymous with the “Internet meme” - image macros, usually accompanied by text,

which can be directly shared on the Internet and/or edited easily to modify the message and shared again. Since the creation of these image macros, researchers too have essentially conflated the term “meme” with these image macros. These provide an extraordinarily good illustration of how memes evolve, gaining or losing traits along the way; however, memetics has focused mostly on this subset of memes to the exclusion of other types of replicating cultural information (e.g. Shifman, 2013; Davison, 2012, etc.). The memetic perspective I employ uses a linguistic perspective to describe memes from their most ‘atomic’ (e.g. semes) to the ‘molecular’ (e.g. phrases) to the ecological (e.g. entire ideologies).

Daniel Dennett (2007) expands upon Dawkins’ idea to frame *viral* memes (units of cultural transmission) as a sort of cognitive/cultural *virus* – infecting and hijacking the mind, akin to cordyceps and lancet flukes taking over ants’ brains. The size of memes can vary – they might be as ‘small’ as a gesture or as ‘large’ as an entire ideology – but at any size, memes, like any virus, have specific effects on their hosts and populations they spread through. Larger memetic ‘viruses’ like religions clearly have effects on ‘bodies’ to which they spread: for instance, the Shaker religion, in which sex was forbidden to all congregants, had the effect of a “sterilizing parasite” on its hosts (Dennett, 2007). Smaller memes – such as specific words and frames – operate in concert with these larger memes (also called memeplexes; c.f. Blackmore, 1999). For instance, the way that increasing access to health care insurance is framed - merely by changing the word “expanded” to “extended” - creates a fifteen-point gain in popularity for the exact same policy (Westen & Luntz, 2022). Once the “virus” - the idea of increasing access to health care – *mutates* its “spike proteins” in this way, it more readily attaches to its target “cells” (minds) and

hence increases its “communicability” (c.f. Rushkoff, 2010).

At any size, what makes memes powerful is their ability to edit their “hosts” maps of meaning (c.f. Hall, 1980) and even the hosts’ physical brain structures (Strauss, 2018) - thereby creating specific ideological outcomes. Because hosts work on behalf of their favorite memes – ideas so powerful that they are both “to die for” and to live for (Dennett, 2007), they seek to improve the virality of those memes. This is most effectively done by driving engagement with the meme in question. A social media study by Rathje et al. (2021) found that each political out-group word in a post increased the odds of a retweet or re-share by about 67%; they concluded that emotionally charged content, particularly that which evokes anger or contempt, drives the most engagement. For instance, a straightforward news story about classified documents the FBI found when they raided Donald Trump’s home was ‘liked’ around 2,100 times; however, a response to the story in which a Republican congresswoman called Trump’s opponents “dumbasses” was ‘liked’ ten times as much, and left-winger's response calling Trump a “traitor” was ‘liked’ *twenty* times as much (60 Minutes, 2022).

The word *viral* has become a popular metaphorical way to describe ideas since the popularization of the term “viral marketing” (referring to the rapid, virus-like spread of marketing content; Rayport, 1996). Berger & Milkman (2010) analyzed a collection of more than 7,500 articles published by the *New York Times*, concluding that “individual-level psychological processes (e.g., emotion) act as a selection mechanism on culture, shaping what becomes viral.” This study comes to the same conclusion as Rathje et al. (2021): people respond to - and spread - content that makes them angry far more than content that evokes benign emotions. Hence, according to Center for Humane

Technology CEO Tristan Harris, the more one's content uses contempt and stirs up anger, "the more it will get shared; so, we are being rewarded for being division entrepreneurs" (60 Minutes, 2022). In this metaphor, then, angry content is not just 'viral' but a highly contagious 'virus', whereas content evoking more benign emotions are less 'communicable'.

As is the case with viruses - "string(s) of nucleic acid with attitude" (Dennett, 2007) - it is possible for a host to be infected by multiple "parasitic" memes ("information packets with attitude"; Dennett, *ibid.*). When this happens with viruses, it is referred to as viral interference; this is the case with memes as well. As multiple viruses in the same body can be "positive (additive or synergistic) or negative (antagonistic)" (Piret & Boivin, 2022), so too can multiple ideas in the same mind reinforce each other or create dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Additionally, viral interference "has been demonstrated at the cellular, host, and population levels" (Piret & Boivin, 2022). In Bender & Beller's (2013) terms, in the body politic, this "cellular level" represents cognition, while the "host" level is an entanglement of cognition and the cultural influence on it; and the "population" level represents the cumulative cultural effect of memes – the spread of intellectual contagion. Another consequence of "infected" hosts' work on behalf of their favorite memes is that other, contrary memes are seen as a threat. Dennett argues that American memes have gone viral on a global scale and are "wiping out whole cultures. They are wiping out languages; they are wiping out traditions and practices... and it's not our fault, any more than it's our fault when our germs lay waste to people who haven't developed the immunity" (Dennett, 2007; Rushkoff, 2025). This "immunity" he speaks of implies a sort of cultural immune *system*, designed to treat

“invasive species” as threats and developing forms of resistance to their spread, similar to Cook et al.’s (2017) “inoculation strategy.”

Social Judgment Theory and the “Firewall Effect”

Social judgment theory (SJT) suggests audiences evaluate and either integrate or reject new information based on how the information compares with current attitudes. According to this theory, ideas are sorted based on how well they fit into an individual’s current orientation (the degree to which there is “message discrepancy”; Hovland et al., 1980). Information consistent with an audience’s current orientation, then, “resides within one’s latitude of acceptance,” whereas “[a]ttitude-inconsistent information... falls into the latitude of rejection and would be processed systematically, especially when ego-involvement is high” (Zhou & Sheng, 2025; Granberg, 1982).

To create agreement, a messenger can present either a positive message/frame with which they want their audience to agree (assimilation, e.g. “pro-peace”), or a negative message/frame with which they want their audience to disagree (contrasting, e.g. “anti-war”). Assimilation and contrasting are well-illustrated in advertising: an ad that shows an older person’s active lifestyle after beginning a regimen of arthritis medication shows an ideal into which viewers want to assimilate; this shows an attempt at creating assimilation. A popular ad that aired during the 2022 Super Bowl - “Don’t be like Larry” - is an example of contrasting: “Larry” is shown as an archetypical nay-sayer, rejecting good ideas in a series of short vignettes. The commercial ends with “Larry” rejecting the commercial’s object: FTX, a “fast and easy way to get into crypto” - and a final set of text: “Don’t be like Larry” (FTX, 2022). By insulting “Larry,” the ad seeks to move its viewers away from his nay-saying and reject his way of thinking. This is an attempt at

creating contrasting: “don’t be like Larry” is a call to not behave in the short-sighted and luddite ways “Larry” behaved in the commercial. In the case of “weird” - which paints its object (Donald Trump, his allies, and his followers) in a negative light – a similar attempt at contrasting is in effect. Framing Trump (etc.) as ‘weird’ carries with it an implication: “don’t be like Trump or his allies/followers.” This is an implicit call to not endorse or participate in the distastefully/dangerously aberrant (‘weird’) behavior of Trump and his allies.

SJT emphasizes not only message discrepancy and assimilation/contrasting, but also how strongly audiences are invested in their current orientation regarding the question at hand (“ego involvement”; Hovland et al., 1980). The more connected one is to their position, then, the harder it will be to create movement from that position; an audience that disagrees with a message will be relatively easier to “move” from their position if there is little emotional commitment to that position (Jillings, 1951; Granberg, 1982; Zhou & Sheng, 2025).

This suggests that since ‘weird’ is deployed in this case as a negative attribute, audiences that are oriented to think negatively of its object (Donald Trump, his allies, and his followers) will be more likely to experience low message discrepancy and accept the idea that Trump and his allies are 'weird,' whereas audiences that are oriented to think positively of them will experience high message discrepancy and hence be likely to reject the idea. Additionally, those who are oriented to think positively of Trump and his allies but do not have high ego involvement are likely to experience less message discrepancy and therefore be more likely to accept the framing than those with high ego involvement.

Considering Postman's (1986) idea about "fragmented subcultures" - separate

cultural enclaves that "grow up around" media suitable for reinforcing their ideology - it is apparent that diverging political cultures are built on diverging maps of meaning. This is the first type of memetic interference this thesis examines: that of subcultures with their own, contrary maps of meaning that influence how ideas are considered based on preexisting political ideology (see also: Fish [1976], who referred to these fragmented subcultures in this context as 'interpretive communities').

In regards to culturally-situated frameworks of knowledge (c.f. Hall, 1980; Bruner & Postman, 1949), viral/memetic interference becomes more multidimensional: when "Audience A" encounters frames advancing "Ideology B," the frames provided by their own ideologically/culturally situated frameworks of knowledge provide an "anchoring" effect and the opposing frame creates a "message discrepancy" effect (Hovland et al., 1980). In this situation, memetic interference results in something akin to an operating system's "firewall" designed to filter out and 'quarantine' dangerous programs: when a computer is working as it should, this firewall works to identify malevolent, dangerous programs that could cause serious problems. If, however, the computer becomes infected with specific types of malware, that malware may then be able to manipulate the system's firewall settings and exploit its configuration to worsen the situation. If, in other words, a 'virus' essentially has control over an operating system's 'firewall,' it essentially redraws its 'frameworks of knowledge' and 'maps of meaning.'

It is now well established that human beings are more "*homo narrans*" than "*homo economicus*" - in other words, we are "more likely to respond to narratives than to expert-based information" (Veselková, 2017, p. 178); this reinforces Berger & Milkman's (2010) and Rathje's (2021) studies, in which the issues (Trump having taken

classified documents and Democrats' reaction to it) were framed in terms of narrative. Memes matter in the creation of narratives for the same reason that words matter in the creation of stories (words are "memes that can be pronounced"; Dennett, 2007). The narrative implicatures provided by these memes are one level in a broader nest of memes. Other levels may include these words, the sentences framing the words, and the ideologies that are produced when these memes are spread.

Warren notes that authoritarians "can tolerate no public ridicule" and need to keep "an impenetrable image" (2006, p. 3). Hence, because ridicule "spread[s] *virally*, almost impossible to control, it penetrates that image and deflates its power" (ibid.). Being ridiculed means losing respect, and thereby influence, and thereby retention of current followers and adding new ones (p. 10). Martyrdom in death is one thing; but "ridicule can be worse than death... [it is] destruction without martyrdom" (ibid.). This appears to have been the strategy behind adopting "weird" as a primary attribute agenda-setting frame; it was the creation of a narrative (illustrated by "weird-checking" Trump) as a [partial] replacement for arguments based on fact and expert opinion (illustrated by "fact-checking" Trump).

Of course, not everyone fears authoritarians; there is an appeal for some in the strength and seriousness of such figures. Particularly when "people feel a lack of control in their own lives," they often turn to charismatic "masters of outward confidence, self-assuredness, which is reassuring and infectious" (Fagan, 2017). Authoritarians' followers are led to feel a lack of control; they therefore yearn for the control that the authoritarian assures them they offer, as opposed to the ostensible chaos of the status quo (Warren, 2006). If this is the case with Trump's stoking of fears over illegal immigration, the

introduction of "weird" would create a different firewall effect: if successful, it would function as character assassination, penetrating Trump's "impenetrable image" (Warren, 2006, p.3) and attempting to create "destruction without martyrdom" (ibid., p. 10).

Framing and agenda-setting

When salience is transferred from a messenger to a receiver, the receiver follows the messenger's lead in perceiving and/or emphasizing the same attributes/aspects of the object in question as important. This transfer – the selection of "some aspects of a perceived reality... mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993, p. 52; Scheufele 1999, p. 107) - is known as framing. Framing is thus the emphasis on particular aspects of an object (an entity or event) and can be seen as the *method* of the transfer of salience.

Influencing how people see the world - to "transfer... salience from the media agenda to the public agenda" on the one hand (McCombs, 2018) and to supply the "orientation" that people need (Lippmann, 1922) on the other - is known as Agenda-Setting. This influence, it should be stressed, is not exercised directly: "[the press] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*.... the world will look different to different people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). McCombs (2005) adds to this: "The media not only can be successful in telling us what to think about, they also can be successful in telling us how to think about it" (p. 546).

Because the world looks different to those with different 'maps' (Cohen, 1963), it

is critical to understand what goes into the creation of these maps. To spread an agenda-serving idea (or, in other words, to replicate an agenda-serving meme) in the minds of a wider public, modern mass media makes use of two modalities or “stages” of Agenda-Setting: general agenda-setting and attribute agenda-setting (or framing). General agenda-setting effects (the transfer of salience on what objects to think about) and attribute agenda-setting effects (the transfer of salience on how to characterize those objects) are both done to have the effect that “elements prominent on the media agenda [will] become prominent over time on the public agenda” (ibid.). Audience agenda and media agenda have a complex relationship and are explored in greater detail by Scheufele (1999, pp. 114-115), who proposes that “outcomes of certain processes” (such as media’s effects on audiences) become new “inputs for subsequent processes” (such as how journalists choose to convey information going forward).

Because the success of a framing effort is an effect, and because mass media engages in media framing, this theoretical lens posits that framing is “an extension of agenda setting” (ibid., p. 103; McCombs, 1997, p. 441). While mass media have strong influence on providing orientation, or “constructing social reality,” this influence is not the only factor in said construction (Scheufele 1999, p. 105; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p.2; McLeod et al., 1987). Frames are used not only in the construction of messages but also in the interpretation of messages by the recipient. This means that both media frames and individual frames factor into the study of media effects (Scheufele 1999, p. 106), showing that the process is dialectic. In fact, audience interpretation and messengers’ failure to transfer salience - a failure of messengers to produce their desired effect(s) - constitute important indicators and pressures on how messengers create their

frames (Scheufele, 1999, pp. 108-110). In other words, when the messengers' message does not "land," it will be reworked so that it will. Hence, audience conversations that display their interpretation constitute important sites of analysis both for media and researchers. While this thesis focuses on Reddit (discussed in greater detail below), these mass communication theories are important baselines because, while expressed in different ways online, communities/audiences must still interact with frames; frames are still constructed with agendas in mind; and ideological divides still exist and still create communities, norms, and enclaves.

Scheufele does not explicitly deal with ideological divides but nonetheless references Price et al. (1995) to explain how information is processed when the mind is faced with multiple competing frames. This is "a kind of 'hydraulic' pattern, with thoughts of one kind, stimulated by the frame, driving out other possible responses" (1995, p. 113). This effect - like the "priming" effect (which happens when one stimulus influences how people respond to a subsequent stimulus; Molden 2014, p. 3) - is like a fulcrum: the more salience one frame has, the less the other frames have. As an example of priming, if a company is trying to gauge how people feel about a politician, asking survey respondents questions about politicians they are *dissatisfied* with first can cause subsequent answers to be influenced by the negativity they felt for *unrelated* politicians at the outset. The "hydraulic" effect is different in that frames are actively - even if subconsciously - altered on a more permanent basis, for the *same* object (e.g. a survey telling respondents positive things they might not have known about a politician before surveying them about their feelings toward them). This hydraulic effect is the second type of "memetic interference" this thesis examines.

CHAPTER THREE

SYNTHESIS

This thesis centers an examination of two types of memetic interference: one established (Scheufele’s “hydraulic effect”; 1999, p. 105) and one proposed (the “firewall effect”). Both may create specific ideological outcomes through the spread of memes.

The hydraulic effect is relatively simple to explain. When the mind is faced with multiple compatible frames, it is faced with a choice: which frame is more compelling? As with priming, where thoughts of one kind are driven out by the preeminence of thoughts of another kind, this is an inverse relationship: the stronger (more salient) one frame is, the weaker (less salient) the other becomes. Applied to the topic at hand, “weird” has an inverse relationship with “fascist.” While “fascist” stimulates a fear response, “weird” stimulates a ridicule response; so, the tale of the 2024 election was re-framed on the American left – or, at least the re-framing was attempted – from what amounts to a horror story to what amounts to a black comedy. To what degree people may or may not have been swayed by these narratives may be difficult to discern from an examination of subreddits, but it is nevertheless an important consideration to notice when it presents itself. In a way, the creation of r/WeirdGOP itself and the amount of engagement with the community is itself evidence of some assimilation; and several threads in r/AskTrumpSupporters provide direct engagement with the accusation of “weirdness” that may shed light on this question.

The firewall effect creates significantly more stress. Where the hydraulic effect takes place between multiple compatible frames/memes, this effect involves a rejection of

one of multiple incompatible frames/memes. This can present itself by “contrasting” (SJT) in which the original frame is preserved and the competing frame is rejected; or by “assimilation” in which the new frame is integrated and the old one replaced. The degree of “ego involvement” (Hovland, 1980) is of particular importance.

These theories as synthesized lead me to seek an understanding of both the “firewall effect” and the hydraulic effect for ‘weird.’ Because diverging ideological subcultures – pro-Trump and anti-Trump – are likely to demonstrate these effects, I sought to find a somewhat representative sample of each subculture’s discourse about ‘weird.’ I settled on two Reddit communities as my sites of analysis (explained in greater detail in the Methodology section below): r/WeirdGOP and r/AskTrumpSupporters. Here I asked **RQ1:** How did users of r/WeirdGOP interact with the ‘weird’ meme? and **RQ2:** How did users of r/AskTrumpSupporters interact with the ‘weird’ meme?

Although the examination is being done largely with an eye on the hydraulic and firewall effects, these questions leave open the possibility that other types of interaction might be found. As the meme is spread in a friendly environment and an unfriendly environment simultaneously, examining these interactions – both additive/synergistic and antagonistic forms of memetic interference – may reveal a great deal about underlying assumptions about norms even as they reveal environmental influences on memetic evolution. These questions were asked to discover elements of the firewall and hydraulic effects, to point to environmental effects on memetic evolution, and to discover any additional insights that a more closed-ended set of questions might miss.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Reddit is a compendium of online forums, in which users join communities ('subreddits') dedicated to specific topics. Depending on the subreddit in question, posts may be textual, links, pictures, videos, or some multimedia combination of two or more of these. Once a post is made in a subreddit, a discussion often takes place between users in the comment section, with threads (series of mostly textual comments responding to a main-level response) being common (Proferes et al., 2021). Reddit, like many other means of computer-mediated communication, provides an abundance of discourse that can be readily located and analyzed by groups of people who share specific interests and opinions. As a site of analysis, Reddit's structure allows for a deep examination of the nuances of specific topics, cultures, and ideologies. In addition, Reddit's communities are mostly publicly available; so, this abundance of readily available discourse can be analyzed without the ethical complexities presented by private communications, interviews, and the like. The discourse itself does not face limits on length, which ensures an abundance of data for qualitative analysis (ibid.). Taken together, Reddit is a logical place to look when studying the nuances of ideological discourse.

My method draws from Kevin Nutt's (2023) application of Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) to Reddit. CTDA (c.f. Brock, 2018) works to examine the discourse itself (content) in the context of the online platform in question (technology, aka medium; Brock, 2018, pp. 1020-1021). This means that the architecture and affordances of the platform play a role in encouraging or limiting the nature of the

discourse taking place in these settings. On Reddit, such factors include “the ability to be anonymous, the ability to create community around niche topics, the forms of content users can post (text, pictures, videos, etc.), sorting features, searching algorithm, [and] the upvote/downvote system” (Nutt, 2023, p. 21). In addition, each subreddit has its own affordances, limitations, and culture – which also ultimately influences the discourse produced under their auspices (ibid., p. 18).

Discourse analysis, in a technocultural context, must take into consideration “rules, divisions, and systems of a particular body of knowledge” as well as the “techniques and practices through which objects, concepts, and strategies are formed” (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, p. 114; Nutt, 2023, p. 18). This understanding establishes discourse analysis as a way to understand a given (sub)culture's social construction of weirdness "in relation to (and revelatory of) existing power structures" (Nutt, 2023, p. 18) and their various agendas. CTDA ensures that this pursuit remains sensitive to the technological media(tion) through which the discourse is expressed.

This study analyzes two subreddits: r/AskTrumpSupporters, and r/WeirdGOP. These specific subreddits were chosen because 1) r/WeirdGOP is organized around "weird-checking" the behaviors and policies of the Trump-led Republican party (“GOP”), and is thus an excellent source of discourse that is positive/synergistic toward ‘weird’; and 2) r/AskTrumpSupporters is organized around outsiders asking supporters of Trump questions to get an understanding of how they process information, specifically “packets of information with attitude” (c.f. Dennett, 2007; “attitude” in this sense refers to a framing that seeks specific attitudinal shifts in the audience). This subreddit, then, is an excellent source of discourse that is negative/antagonistic toward ‘weird.’

CTDA was also chosen because it both uses the coding process to foreground power and ideology in digital sites and centers the ways norms and affordances of specific sites and platforms work constitutively with participants' discourse to produce meaning. According to Brock, CTDA is designed not just to study textual discourse, but also to be "applied to the semiotics of... the discourses of its users" (2018, p. 1013). Thus, CTDA examines this visual storytelling as well as the digital context of the interactions and the interactions themselves. This is important because the affordances of these subreddits are different: in r/AskTrumpSupporters, posts are limited to text (although hyperlinks are allowed); in r/WeirdGOP, posts may be solely textual, or a mix between text and images, video, and links. Posts in r/WeirdGOP often use visuals - screenshots, still images, videos, etc. - to "weird-check," indicating a type of discourse the affordances provide for: visual storytelling, visceral reactions, "rage-baiting," and "headline-baiting." 'Weirdness,' being in the eye of the beholder, is a "vibe"; and visual storytelling is an excellent way to create such impressions. In contrast, r/AskTrumpSupporters disallows image posts and discourages disrespect of any kind, and at least ostensibly provides affordances only for respectful, reasoned discussion. The purposes of these subreddits thus create an important mediation of the cultural/political conversation in question.

For the analysis of r/WeirdGOP, I had three selection criteria for the discourse I chose for analysis: 1) Posts selected had to be among the most popular on the subreddit (over 1000 'upvotes'); 2) Posts had to identify Donald Trump, and/or J.D. Vance, and/or MAGA figureheads (politicians or media pundits aligned with the MAGA movement), and or MAGA followers, as 'weird'; and 3) Posts had to provide an indication of what about the post made its target 'weird.' I did not delve into the comment section for these

posts. In the end, I selected and examined 62 posts that were made from October 2024 to January 25, 2025. While the available posts do not start in late July (Reddit only shows the 1000 most recent posts) and thereby show a more full history, it still provides a period of time that stretches from before the election until after Trump began his Presidency. This period shows audience agenda and media/messenger agenda regarding frame-setting, as well as memetic fitness and evolution over time.

For the analysis of r/AskTrumpSupporters, I identified two posts asking Trump supporters questions about Trump's "weirdness," with over 400 responses from supporters to those questions, and then examined the comments left on these posts. My criteria for comment selection changed as I analyzed this subreddit, and is detailed in the Results section below. While there were only two posts of this sort, the high engagement with the questions posed and the type of defenses provided cover a range of strategies and provided a rich set of meaningful data.

After the data was gathered, I performed open coding on the selected discourse to ascertain how participants on Reddit respond to and/or construct 'weird'. I identified and coded specific types of "weird-checking" in r/WeirdGOP; in r/AskTrumpSupporters, I identified and coded specific types of responses to these accusations. Each code was developed through open, axial, and selective phases of coding, then analyzed to ascertain the degrees to which memetic interference is working for or against an assimilation of the frame-setting meme.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

r/WeirdGOP

r/WeirdGOP is a Subreddit with approximately 20,000 members. Although this subreddit was created in July of 2024, Reddit allows users to view only the most recent 1,000 posts. Because of this limitation, the earliest available post was from October 2024. The majority of these posts present screenshots of headlines, still images, links to news stories, or videos to the community, usually accompanied by a description of the material as ‘weird’ for various reasons. My criteria for selecting posts (described above) yielded 73 posts with 1,000 or more upvotes at the time of analysis. Of these, 11 were eliminated; some simply called Trump ‘weird’ with no reason, while others left ambiguous what about the content was ‘weird’.

I analyzed the remaining 62 posts for definitions or aspects of ‘weirdness’ as applied to Donald Trump, J.D. Vance, MAGA Figureheads, MAGA politicians, and MAGA followers. “MAGA” is an acronym for Donald Trump’s campaign slogan from 2016: “Make America Great Again.” What makes a person “MAGA” is an explicit endorsement of Donald Trump and/or the ideas he presents as the means of making America “great again” - tariffs, deportations, the construction of a border wall, ending “transgenderism,” an attack on what is derogatorily called “wokeness,” etc. From this set of posts, I went through the stages of open coding (from which I gathered 49 codes), axial coding (which revised these 49 codes to 19 codes), and finally selective coding.

In the first step (open coding), I created codes describing the type of ‘weirdness’ accusations I found. There were 49 total codes: *Authoritarianism*, *Fascism*,

Racism/Xenophobia, Insults, Immaturity, Normalizing Toxic Masculinity, Toxic Masculinity, Whininess, Neediness, Cowardice, Defensiveness, Conspiracy Theorizing, Denigrating Oneself to “Own the Libs,” Cult Behavior, Fear of Women, Bad Manners, Insensitivity/Inconsiderateness, Lack of Restraint, Being Thin-Skinned, Unchivalrous Behavior, Portraying Weakness as Strength, Hypocrisy/Double-Standards, Creation of Spectacle, Bizarre Aesthetics, Vindictiveness, Crime, Voter Intimidation, Obsession with Others’ Bodies, Harming the Vulnerable, Obsession with Genitals, “Pleading,” “Protesting Too Much Methinks,” Election Interference, Pathetic, Self-Importance, Being Insufferable, Lying/Misinformation/Disinformation, Normalizing Authoritarianism/Fascism, Normalizing Racism/Xenophobia, Stalking, Creepiness, Obsequiousness, Sexualizing Trump, Callousness, Disrespect (other than insults), Persecution Complex/Oppression Olympics, Bizarre Social Behavior, and Normalizing Bizarre Social Behavior.

In the second stage (axial coding), I grouped these codes into themes. This coding stage also revised the groups into *Trump/Vance, MAGA Figureheads, and MAGA Followers*. Other codes were combined into themes (e.g. *Trump Worship* became the axial code under which “Cult Behavior” and “Obsequiousness” were reorganized). Axial coding yielded the following 19 codes: *Trump Worship, Reframing Weirdness as Strength, Authoritarianism/Fascism, Racism/Xenophobia, Toxic Masculinity/Sexism, Hypocrisy/Double-Standards, Abuse of Power, Disrespect to Individuals, Dishonesty, Conspiracy Theorizing, Social Aberrance, “Protesting Too Much Methinks,” Persecution Complex, Egomania, Lack of Restraint, Immaturity, Bizarre Aesthetics, and Vindictiveness.*

In the final stage (selective coding) I further refined and completed my code set. First, *Immaturity* was expanded to cover *Vindictiveness* and *Lack of Restraint*. Then, *Reframing Weirdness as Strength* (which covered a reimagination of immaturity, vindictiveness, defensiveness, lack of restraint, and attacking the vulnerable as types of strength), was combined with *Immaturity* under the new code *Bombast*. In the meantime, “*Protesting Too Much Methinks*” was folded into the code *Dishonesty*. In the end, I had fifteen total codes for things anti-Trump people consider “weird” about Trump/Vance, MAGA Figureheads, and/or the MAGA movement at large: *Trump Worship*, *Bombast*, *Authoritarianism/Fascism*, *Racism/Xenophobia*, *Toxic Masculinity/Sexism*, *Hypocrisy/Double-Standards*, *Abuse of Power*, *Disrespect to Individuals*, *Dishonesty*, *Conspiracy Theorizing*, *Obsession with Others’ Bodies*, *Socially Aberrant Behavior*, *Persecution Complex*, *Narcissism*, and *Bizarre Aesthetics*.

1. Trump worship

“Trump Worship” is a type of ‘weirdness’ covering cult-like behavior, mythologization, and/or sexualization of Donald Trump (example below). Four posts accused MAGA Figureheads of this sort of ‘weirdness,’ while eleven accused MAGA Followers of it. This type of ‘weirdness’ was used four times to describe MAGA Figureheads and eleven times to describe MAGA followers.



Fig. 2.1: A painting of Trump, depicted as an angel with fiery sword, banishing Joe Biden and Kamala Harris from the White House, just as a similarly armed angel in the Bible banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The text reads: “Trump-supporting Christians are weird”.

2. *Bombast*

“Bombast” covers immaturity, vindictiveness, defensiveness, and attacking the vulnerable – and a reimagination of these traits as examples of strength. One post, for example, shared a now-infamous video clip in which Donald Trump, at a campaign rally, mocked reporter Serge Kovalski, who has a congenital joint condition, by denigratingly mimicking his arm movements. In the 62 posts I examined, this type of ‘weirdness’ was used five times to describe Trump and ten times to describe MAGA Followers.

3. *Authoritarianism/Fascism*

“Authoritarianism/Fascism” involves abuse of executive power, and support of those abuses, in service of palingenetic ultranationalism (c.f. Griffin, 1993). This type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe MAGA Figureheads four times and MAGA followers

six times (see Fig. 2(b) below). Although Trump was often called fascist and/or authoritarian in less popular posts, this descriptor did not apply to him in the most popular posts selected for this thesis. This could theoretically mean Trump is decreasingly seen as authoritarian/fascist, or it might mean that his authoritarianism/fascism is taken for granted such that posts describing him as such are no longer as engaging as other, less “granted” posts. As it is unlikely that this community does not think of Trump this way, this may present an opportunity for future research on the “communicability” of memes after they have reached the point of cultural saturation (after the ‘virus’ has become ‘endemic’). I discuss this further in the Directions for Future Research section below.



Fig. 2.2: “Totally normal tattoos for the secretary of defense to have”. The image shows Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, shirtless, with a large crusader cross tattoo over his heart. This tattoo – and the “Deus Vult” tattoo on his bicep – glorify the violence of the Crusades.

4. *Racism/Xenophobia*

“Racism/Xenophobia” is a type of ‘weirdness’ involving explicitly stated

prejudice against people based on their race and/or country of origin. This type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe MAGA Figureheads two times and MAGA Followers five times. One post, for instance, shared the text “Weird and racist rant from a member of Congress” along with a screenshot of an X post in which Rep. Ray Higgins wrote: “Lol. These Haitians are wild. Eating pets, vudu, nastiest country in the western hemisphere, cults, slapstick gangsters... but damned if they don’t feel all sophisticated now, filing charges against our President and VP. All these thugs better get their mind right and their ass out of our country before January 20.” Another user posted an image of Trump supporters holding signs, among which was a person in a Ku Klux Klan outfit holding a Trump sign, along with the text “Weird racism is becoming the new norm.” As with Authoritarianism/Fascism, although Trump was often called racist or xenophobic in less popular posts, this descriptor did not apply to him in the more popular posts I analyzed; instead, they were used to describe MAGA opinions and followers exclusively.

5. Hypocrisy/Double-Standards

“Hypocrisy/Double-Standards” means harsh judgment by the MAGA movement against their political rivals for particular kinds of offensive behavior, but lenient (or no) judgment on Trump or MAGA politicians for similar behaviors. One such post, for example, showed an X post by Laura Loomer which said “Kamala Harris is married. Why isn’t her last name Emhoff?” The response to this post was included in the screenshot below: “The same reason Ivanka Trump’s last name isn’t Kushner.” This type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump/Vance one time, MAGA Figureheads one time, and MAGA Followers four times.

6. Abuse of power

“Abuse of power” involves inappropriate and/or criminal behavior such as voter intimidation/suppression, harming the vulnerable by words or actions, sexual coercion, and illegally taking emoluments from foreign nations. It is differentiated from “Authoritarianism/Fascism” because, while this type of behavior might be expected and permissible under fascism, they are taking place within an ostensibly democratic system in which the behavior is outside the law. In one post, for instance, the user posted “Weird Trump named in Epstein/Ghislaine document leak” along with a photograph of a case file document which graphically describes Donald Trump raping a twelve-year-old girl. Another post describes “Weird and outrageous voter intimidation” and shares a screenshot of a news headline about opponents of Florida’s abortion ban being “visited” by Florida police. This type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump/Vance four times, MAGA Figureheads five times, and MAGA Followers three times.

7. Disrespect to individuals

“Disrespect to individuals” covers personal attacks against individuals for reasons that are not clearly borne of racism or sexism. The post about Trump’s mockery of reporter Serge Kovalski’s congenital joint condition was coded here as well, as well as a screenshot of an X post referring to Tim Walz’ son as a “retard” with a text post describing it as “Weird and Frustrating.” In the 62 posts I examined, this type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump/Vance seven times, MAGA Figureheads five times, and MAGA Followers two times.

8. Toxic masculinity/Sexism

“Toxic masculinity/Sexism” describes prejudice and/or discrimination against women, and/or normalization of negative behaviors typically associated with maleness (such as sexually objectifying women, refusal to show emotion, etc.). In the 62 posts I examined, this type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump/Vance two times, MAGA Figureheads two times, and followers two times (examples below).

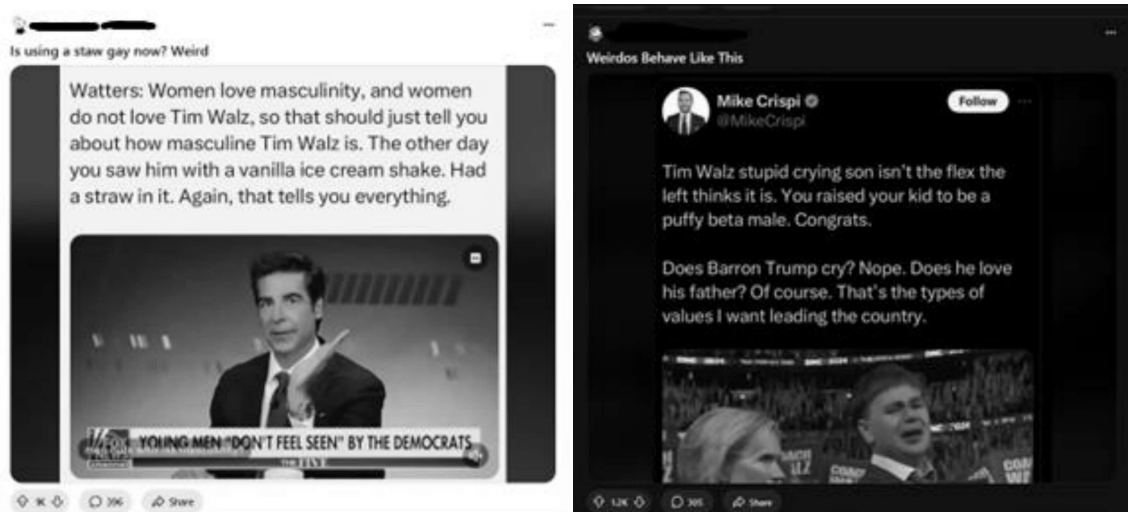


Fig. 2.3 (LEFT): The text provided by the poster says “Is using a straw gay now? Weird”. The image shows FOX reporter Jesse Watters and his words: “Women love masculinity, and women do not love Tim Walz, so that should just tell you about how masculine Tim Walz is. The other day you saw him with a vanilla ice cream shake. Had a straw in it. Again, that tells you everything.”
Fig. 2.4 (RIGHT): The text provided by the poster says “Weirdos Behave Like This”. The image shows a picture of Tim Walz’ son’s display of emotion at the Democratic National Convention with the commentary: “Tim Walz stupid crying son isn’t the flex the left thinks it is. You raised your kid to be a puffy beta male. Congrats. Does Barron Trump cry? Nope. Does he love his father? Of course. That’s the types of values I want leading the country.”

9. Dishonesty

“Dishonesty” covers misleading statements, suspicious defensiveness, and outright lying. One such post, which describes Trump as a “weird sad man,” shares a screenshot of a Truth Social post by Donald Trump which read: “ABC FAKE NEWS has been completely discredited and is now under investigation. Did they give Comrade

Kamala the questions? It was 3 on 1, but they were mentally challenged people, against one person of extraordinary genius. It wasn't even close, as is now reflected in the polls. I WON THE DEBATE!". While there is no evidence to suggest ABC was under investigation for providing Kamala Harris the questions before the debate, and while there were certainly polls conducted that showed Trump the winner, CNN polling showed Harris the winner (63% to 37%); YouGov polling showed Harris the winner (43% to 28%); and even "pundits at Fox News, the conservative TV network, agreed she bested Trump" (Speri, 2024).

Another post included the text "Trump telling weird lies again" alongside a screenshot of another of his Truth Social posts, which said: "Kamala's Medical Report is really bad. With all of the problems that she has, there is a real question as to whether or not she should be running for President! MY REPORT IS PERFECT – NO PROBLEMS!!!!" Kamala Harris' medical report listed only three conditions: nearsightedness, seasonal allergies, and urticaria (a common skin condition) (Schneid, 2024). Trump's post was made on October 15, 2024, three days after his campaign released what they referred to as "medical records" (in actuality, they were reports about an injury Trump sustained to his ear after an assassination attempt in July of 2024). Trump never released a full medical report.

In the 62 selected posts, this type of 'weirdness' was used to describe Trump/Vance two times, MAGA Figureheads one time, and MAGA Followers two times.

10. Conspiracy Theorizing

“Conspiracy Theorizing” involves far-fetched and unfounded accusations leveled at political rivals. One such post shows a screenshot of an X post claiming that “They are using HAARP to ensure that HURRICANE HELENE devastates the largest Republican stronghold area in Florida... They will stop at nothing” (the accompanying text says “Weird how they think the weather is some kind of electoral interference”). A second post shares an X post by MAGA loyalist Laura Loomer claiming that Haitians “aren’t just eating cats and dogs” but also human beings. In the 62 posts I examined, this type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump/Vance one time, MAGA Figureheads two times, and MAGA Followers two times.

11. Obsession with others’ bodies

“Obsession with others’ bodies” is ‘weird’ by virtue of a troubling and aberrant focus on others’ physical bodies, and often on their genitals (examples below). This form of ‘weirdness’ described MAGA Figureheads eight times and MAGA Followers two times. This code, while not one of the most notable results here, became particularly relevant in the results for r/AskTrumpSupporters as one of the most salient rationales given by Trump supporters when rejecting the framing of Trump as weird (by comparison).



Fig. 2.5: A short exchange between a supporter of Kamala Harris and a supporter of Donald Trump. The Trump supporter says, “Dudes who vote for Kamala Harris pee sitting down.” The Harris supporter responds: “Dudes who vote for Trump think about how other dudes pee.”

12. Socially aberrant behavior

“Socially aberrant behavior” is a type of ‘weirdness’ that covers strange visual displays of loyalty, socially unacceptable forms of aggression, willingness to engage in crime, public displays of racism, and even in one case “stalking” (see Fig. 2(f) and Fig. 2(g) below). In the 62 posts I examined, this type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump/Vance three times, MAGA Figureheads one time, and MAGA Followers one time.



Fig. 2(f) (LEFT): The post reads: “Why do people call MAGA weird? | VOTE – EARLY!!!”. The image – possibly generated by artificial intelligence – shows four men dressed only in diapers at a political gathering (wearing diapers was, for a period during the 2024 election season, seen as a show of support for Trump, whose apparent reliance on incontinence underwear was pointed out by his political opponents).

Fig. 2(g) (RIGHT): The post reads: “Remember when Trump invited these bozos to speak at the RNC? WEIRD”. The image posted is of Mark and Patricia McCloskey, pointing and waving weapons at Black Lives Matter protestors from their front yard in St. Louis.

13. Persecution complex

A “persecution complex” occurs when the ‘weirdo’ attempts to wrest victimhood back from the people currently complaining of victimization, recasting themselves as the true victim. In the 62 posts I examined, this type of ‘weirdness’ only came up once and was used to describe a MAGA Follower. The post contains a screenshot of a Huffington Post article in which a man, wearing a Nazi Panzer Division pin, complains about being demonized for being cisgendered, white, and right-wing. Clearly any ‘demonization’ was likely to have come about not due to his gender identity, racial identity, or general political leaning, but from his open support of Nazis.

14. Narcissism

“Narcissism” involves self-aggrandizement and excessive self-promotion. This code was left separate from “Trump Worship” for two reasons: First, not all narcissism is necessarily done in service to a cult dynamic; and second, Trump himself was not the only person whose behavior was described in these posts as narcissistic. This type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump four times and MAGA Figureheads one time and are largely coded under *Bombast* and *Dishonesty* as well (examples given above).

15. Bizarre aesthetics

“Bizarre aesthetics” describes personal presentation that is far outside the norm.

This type of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe Trump in two of the 62 posts I examined (see Fig. 2(h) below).

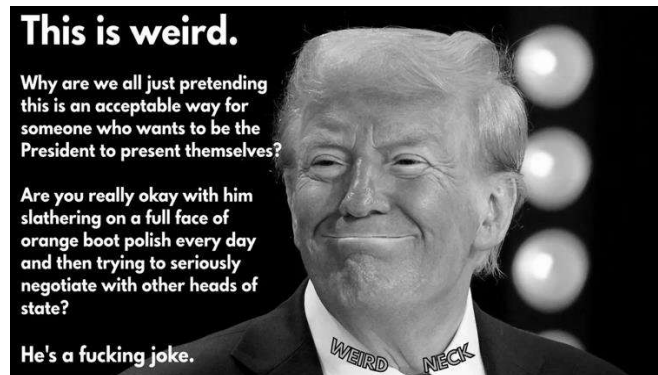


Fig. 2(h): This meme shows Donald Trump’s face, whose famous spray-tan leaves noticeable gaps in coverage over his eyes, mouth, and the sides of his face. The text of the meme reads: “This is weird. Why are we all just pretending this is an acceptable way for someone who wants to be the President to present themselves? Are you really okay with him slathering on a full face of orange boot polish every day and then trying to seriously negotiate with other heads of state? He’s a fucking joke.”

r/AskTrumpSupporters

My second site of analysis was r/AskTrumpSupporters, a Subreddit with approximately 93,000 members. In this community, users are classified as “supporter,” “undecided,” or “nonsupporter” via user “flair” (text appearing under users’ profile names each time they create a post). Posts by “undecideds” and “nonsupporters” – including comments under the main post – must be “clarifying in nature with an inquisitive intent.”

On this subreddit, most posts are created by nonsupporters and receive engagement from Trump supporters. The moderators on this page regularly prune comments that violate the seven rules of the subreddit, particularly the first rule: “Be civil and sincere in your interactions and assume the same of others.” In my data collection, I found two posts asking Trump supporters to engage with the accusation that Trump and/or his supporters were ‘weird.’ These posts had over 400 replies from Trump supporters. When gathering my data, however, I found that the majority of these posts

existed in reply chains that deviated significantly from discussions about Trump's 'weirdness.' All the same, I identified 35 responses in total.

My selection criteria for these 35 posts, at first, were that 1) the respondent was a Trump supporter; and 2) they addressed the idea of Trump's 'weirdness.' In the process of open coding, I created the following codes: *Divergence* (questioning what constitutes 'weirdness' and/or defining the term in such a way as to exclude Donald Trump); *Convergence* (accepting the definition of what constitutes 'weirdness'); *Denial* (disagreeing that Donald Trump is 'weird,' regardless of the definition); *Agreement* (accepting that Donald Trump is 'weird,' regardless of the definition); *I know you are but what am I* (a counter-reproach leveled at Trump's political opposition, regardless of agreement or disagreement); and *Tu quoque* (a counter-reproach leveled at Trump's political opposition, plus agreement that Trump himself is 'weird'). On this basis, I eliminated several posts that made a counter-reproach without addressing the question of whether Trump was 'weird.'

In the axial coding stage, I combined the two terms under one umbrella term – *Counter-Reproach* – and listed the results on a table to represent *Tu quoque* as the confluence of *Agreement* with *Counter-Reproach*. Here I reintroduced the posts I had initially removed due to having made a counter-reproach without addressing the question of Trump's weirdness, since the avoidance itself is valuable to consider.

In the selective coding process, I split *Counter-Reproach* into two categories: *Counter-Reproach: Related to 'Weird'* and *Counter-Reproach: Unrelated to 'Weird.'* Although the posts selected did not definitively show any *tu quoque* arguments (the confluence of *Agreement* and *Counter-Reproach*), many posts have multiple codes and

thus the presentation was kept in table form. The final data is represented in Fig. 3(a) below:

	Counter-Reproach: Related to 'Weird'	Counter-Reproach: Unrelated to 'Weird'	Denial	Agreement	Divergence	Convergence
Counter-Reproach: Related to 'Weird'	18	1	6	0	3	0
Counter-Reproach: Unrelated to 'Weird'	1	11	0	0	2	0
Denial	6	0	8	0	1	0
Agreement	0	0	0	1	0	1
Divergence	3	2	1	0	10	0
Convergence	0	0	0	1	0	1

Table 1.1: Response types as coded from r/AskTrumpSupporters

1. *Counter-Reproach: Related to 'Weird'*

The most common code – in 18 of the 35 posts – describes an accusation of ‘weirdness’ leveled back at the accusers. Six of these 18 involved a direct denial that Trump is ‘weird,’ while the remaining 12 did not comment on whether Trump is ‘weird’ himself. Three of these comments involved *Divergence* (a redefinition of ‘weird’, essentially reframing the conversation away from whether Trump’s behavior and/or language was distastefully/dangerously abnormal); one example of this sort of response read: “Considering the source, this is a matter of ‘your boos mean nothing, I’ve seen what makes you cheer[.]’ If the left says I’m weird, that means I am normal.” One post leveled additional accusations against Trump’s accusers that were unrelated to ‘weirdness.’ Of these 18 responses, 13 gave explicit reasons for leveling the accusation of ‘weirdness’ back on the accusers (one example is shown below, along with the image the respondent hyperlinked to in the comment). Ten of these 18 mentioned LGBTQ+ acceptance as ‘weird’, with the remaining three focusing on Joe Biden’s [supposed] sexual abuse of

minors, Kamala Harris' laugh, and the ease by which Democrats are brainwashed.

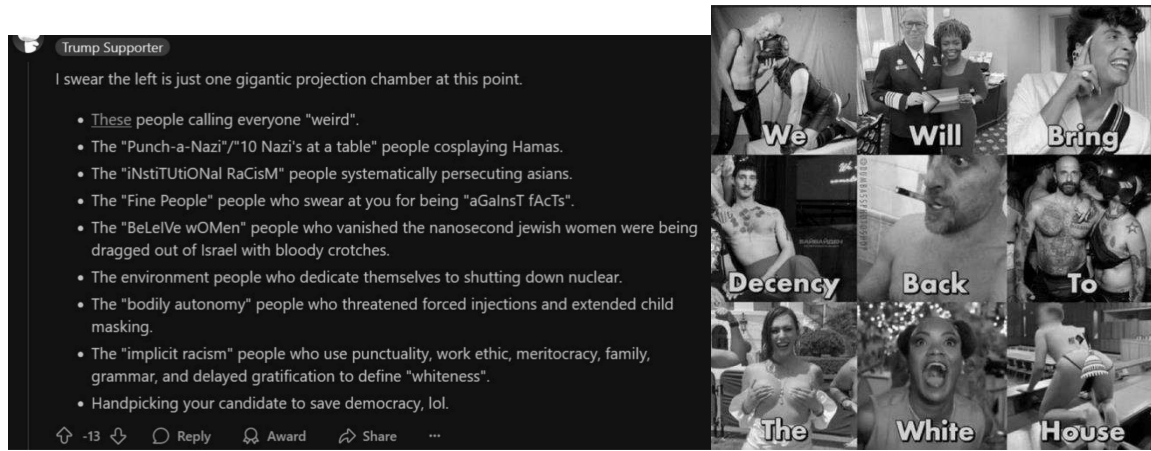


Fig. 3.1 (LEFT): The post that links to Fig. 3.2; it says "I swear the left is just one gigantic projection chamber at this point" and as an example says "these people calling everyone weird". "These" contains a hyperlink to the image on Fig. 3.2.

Fig. 3.2 (RIGHT): A collage of nine images, seven of which show gender-nonconforming and/or sexualized images of LGBTQ+ people. Overlaid over each image is one word making up the phrase: "We Will Bring Decency Back To The White House".

2. Counter-Reproach: Unrelated to 'Weird'

The second-most common code – in 11 of the 35 posts – describes an accusation unrelated to 'weirdness' leveled back against Trump's accusers. One of these also addressed 'weirdness' in the same post, and two of them involved *Divergence*. One example of this sort of response expressed nervousness over the idea "that the government has the ability and control to manipulate the citizenry in this [manner] over and over blatantly" and "that the general public is not smart enough to realize what a dangerous thing this is for either side of any government" (four of these 11 mentioned 'brainwashing' directly or indirectly).

3. Divergence

The third most common code – in 10 of the 35 posts – describes a redefinition of 'weird', reframing the conversation away from whether Trump's behavior and/or

language was distastefully/dangerously abnormal. Three of these ten involved a counter-reproach involving ‘weirdness’; two involved a counter-reproach not involving ‘weirdness’; one involved *Denial*. One example of this sort of response read: “I’m not sure if it’s meaningful to talk about ‘weirdness’ in the abstract. Weirdness can be good, neutral, or bad. I wouldn’t say it’s inherently any of these things.”

4. *Denial*

The fourth most common code – in 8 of the 35 posts – describes a denial of the claim that Trump’s language and/or behavior was ‘weird.’ Of these responses, six engaged in *Counter-Reproach related to ‘Weird’*, while one of them indicated *Divergence*. One example of this sort of response read: “Lol no. The party who tells me men can get pregnant and wants drag queens to read to children telling me conservatives are weird is hilarious to me[.]”

5-6: *Convergence and agreement*

Only one response in the data was coded as an agreement about the definition of ‘weird’ as distastefully/dangerously abnormal behavior and/or presentation. This singular post was also coded with *Agreement*. These codes were kept separate because, theoretically, someone could believe Trump to be weird but for reasons other than what was described by his political opposition; and someone could agree with the definition of ‘weird’ but deny that Trump fits that definition. The one post coded for both *Agreement* and *Convergence* was a one-word response - “No” - to a nonsupporter asking “Would you use the word ‘normal’ to describe Donald Trump?”.

CHAPTER SIX

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis

1. r/WeirdGOP

The viral popularity of the ‘weird’ frame/meme is (or was) unquestionable, but the degree to which Price et al.’s (1995) “Hydraulic” effect happened across the nation is debatable. Still, the existence and popularity of r/WeirdGOP suggests a hydraulic effect was taking place around this meme. This subreddit indicates which specific frames were being displaced “hydraulically” by ‘weird’, and the ways in which the ‘weird’ meme evolves to take on – or lose – additional meanings once it has been spread to a community. It is remarkable, for instance, that ‘weird’ became the dominant frame of Trump in anti-Trump media, replacing frames such as ‘fascist’ and ‘authoritarian’ – yet none of the top posts in r/WeirdGOP described Trump as ‘weird’ by virtue of his connection to authoritarianism/fascism. Instead, this kind of ‘weirdness’ was used to describe MAGA politicians/Figureheads and followers. This certainly does not indicate a decline in salience for the characterization of Trump as ‘fascist’ or ‘authoritarian’, but it does indicate a decline in salience for the characterization of Trump as ‘weird’ on that basis. It may be that an authoritarian characterization has lost its initial memetic ‘virulence’ because it is taken for granted and no longer a useful observation; and/or it may be that this loss in ‘virulence’ shows a hydraulic effect in which ridicule is replaced by fear. This would line up well with Warren’s (2006) observations about ridicule as a

coping mechanism for those actively experiencing suffering.

The total number of descriptions of ‘weirdness,’ too, follow the same pattern: More posts described MAGA Followers as ‘weird’ (51) than described MAGA Figureheads the same way (39); Figureheads, in turn, were described as weird more often than Trump/Vance (31). This lends credence to the initial possibility described above (although it does not negate the second): that ‘weird’ *in general* has lost its initial memetic ‘virulence’ when it comes to Trump/Vance because it is taken for granted and is no longer a useful observation. Further lending credence to this idea is that *Narcissism* – the code covering cult behavior on the part of the leader – was mentioned in only four of the top posts, while *Trump Worship* – the code for cult behavior on the part of the followers – was mentioned eleven times (the most of any MAGA Followers’ codes). On the other hand, there are hundreds more people that qualify as “MAGA Figureheads,” and *millions* more that qualify as “MAGA Followers”; they are clearly perceived as the leaders of the party’s weirdness. This raises a question that can only be answered by a longitudinal study. It would also be worth coding every available post in this way rather than only posts with over 1000 upvotes. The selection of “top posts,” as measured by upvotes, may be reasonable – but affordances of the platform, time of the post, and shock value/sensationalism may affect engagement in a way that distorts the full picture.

The top three codes for MAGA Followers were *Trump Worship*, *Bombast*, and *Authoritarianism/Fascism*. *Bombast* includes a reimagination of immaturity, vindictiveness, defensiveness, lack of restraint, and attacking the vulnerable as types of strength. Together, these account for 27 of the 51 codes that describe MAGA Followers in the data. With the fourth most popular code, *Racism/Xenophobia* (which is closely

related to *Authoritarianism/Fascism* and attacking the vulnerable), 32 of the 51 (62.7%) of codes in this data paint a picture of a base at once fanatically worshipful of Trump and fanatically hateful to Trump's political enemies and to ethnic minorities.

By way of comparison, Trump/Vance were coded for *Narcissism* four times, *Authoritarianism/Fascism* not at all, and *Racism/Xenophobia* not at all – for 5 out of Trump's/Vance's 31 codes (16.1%). Even when adding *Abuse of Power* – which is also closely related to authoritarianism – an extremely narcissistic and fanatically hateful Trump/Vance are described in 9 of their 31 codes (only 29.0%, just over a third of the amount in MAGA Followers' corresponding codes).

The top four codes for Trump/Vance were *Disrespect to Individuals* (7), *Bombast* (5), *Abuse of Power* (4), and *Narcissism* (4). Taken together, these codes frame 'weirdness' as abuses of power to aggrandize themselves and denigrate – or even harm – others.

MAGA Figureheads' top four codes in this data set led with Obsession with Others' Bodies (8 instances) Trump Worship (5 instances), Abuse of Power (5 instances), and Disrespect to Individuals (5 instances). Taken together, these codes frame pundits and politicians who treat Donald Trump as a role model and emulate his behavior by causing harm by rhetoric and by policy to the most vulnerable among us – particularly transgendered individuals. The next-highest code – *Authoritarianism/Fascism*, with 4 instances– elaborates on the philosophical dimension in which this kind of harm might be seen as permissible.

From a memetic perspective, 'weird' spread rapidly in relation to the election news/punditry cycle, entered the anti-Trump media ecosystem, and quickly became a

dominant frame, creating memetic interference with the ‘fascist’ frame and supplanting it for a time. It appears now that this particular meme – *Trump-as-‘weird’* – has lost at least some of its virality, at least in news coverage; by October of 2024, news coverage again began covering *Trump-as-fascist* more than *Trump-as-‘weird’* and the coverage is currently about equal (according to inquiries run using the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone [GDELT]). It is also worth noting that many of the spikes of each still coincide with each other; how this relationship continues should be watched closely.

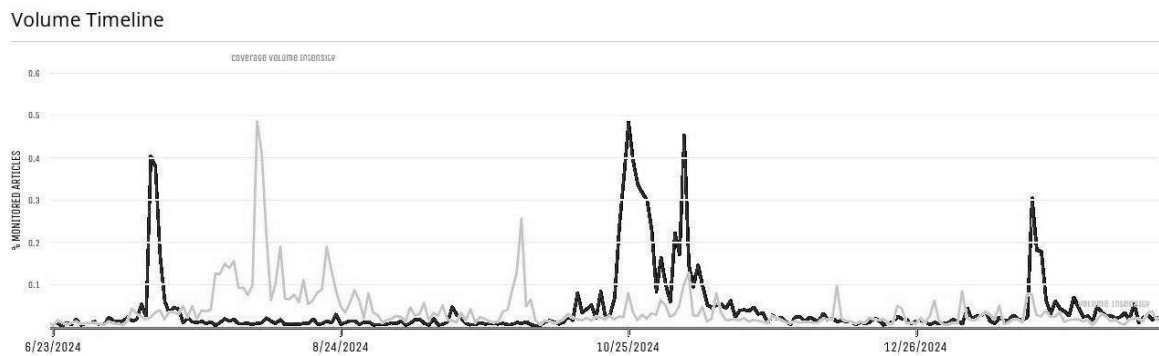


Fig. 4.1: Comparison of GDELT data for frequency in coverage of Trump/Weird (blue) and Trump/Fascist (black) (The GDELT Project, 2025)

GDELT, however, only measures the media agenda and not the audience agenda. In r/WeirdGOP, the migration away from engagement with posts framing Trump as ‘weird’, and the migration toward more engagement with posts framing MAGA followers as ‘weird’, suggests that ‘weird’ may be losing its salience as originally constructed. In these conditions, ‘weird’ – as a meme ‘seeking’ transmission to the maximum number of ‘hosts’ – may now be ‘seeking’ new objects of ridicule for which it may be more salient. A virus, after all, cannot spread if it has reached its maximum possible saturation; it can “continue[] to replicate only if its code can successfully challenge our own. That’s why the ideas inside the virus – the memes – really matter” (Rushkoff, 2020). That Trump is

‘weird’ is not up for debate among anti-Trump voters, so there is nothing to “challenge.” If ‘weird’ is to continue to spread as a political technology, then, it must adapt to serve new functions.

2. *r/AskTrumpSupporters*

While the existence of *r/WeirdGOP* shows agreement and hence a “Hydraulic” effect, the divergent and contrary decoding deployed in *r/AskTrumpSupporters* can shed light on the strategies that went into rebuffing the accusation. Most response types were coded as *Counter-Reproaches*; of the 35 total response types coded, 29 contained counter-reproaches and 16 contained *only* a counter-reproach.

The next most popular strategy – found in 10 instances – is *Divergence*. This strategy questions the meaning of ‘weirdness’, ignoring the clarified definitions provided by Tim Walz and its popular usage on the left to describe what they perceived as Trump’s distastefully/dangerously aberrant behavior and views. This strategy relies on ignorance – whether feigned or not – of what ‘weird’ means when used by opponents of Trump.

Eight responses displayed *Denial* – disagreement that ‘weird’ was an accurate descriptor of Trump. Six of these eight involved *Counter-Reproach* – saying that the accusers, not Trump, are ‘weird,’ while one questioned whether ‘weird’ should be seen as a negative attribute (*Divergence*). Only one response displayed *Agreement*.

Apart from the singular instance of *Agreement* – which only admitted that Trump was not ‘normal’ and did not positively identify Trump as ‘weird’ (leaving open the possibility that this respondent was also engaged in divergence) – the reaction to this ‘accusation’ shows that the majority take ‘weirdness’ in the spirit in which it was meant.

This group either finds the other side ‘weirder’ – engaging in a sort of “lesser of two ‘weirds’” calculation – or they only find the other side ‘weird’ at all.

Discussion

This thesis was created to investigate the reception and evolution of an ideological meme before and after the election it was designed to influence, using a framework that explains framing as media/messenger effects on receptive audiences and a framework that explains strategies that unreceptive audiences employ to reject these attempted effects. To gain an understanding of the moderating effect Reddit had on these effects and strategies, I employed Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis, which provided the lens for critiquing and analyzing both the discourse itself and the mediating affordances of the technology. Specifically, I asked:

- **RQ1:** How did user contributions to r/WeirdGOP develop “weird” as a meme to ridicule current right-wing policies and political figures?
- **RQ2:** How did user contributions to r/AskTrumpSupporters respond to the assertion that right-wing policies and politicians are ‘weird’?

The findings were more nuanced and consequential than expected. ‘Weird’ revealed in r/WeirdGOP less of a ridicule of current right-wing policies and political figures and more of a meme ridiculing right-wing voters. The most popular post types in this anti-Trump setting paint a picture of MAGA followers whose behavior is cult-like, vindictive, and authoritarian-minded, with none of the most popular posts portraying Trump himself as authoritarian (as was the pragmatic intent as explained by Walz). In r/AskTrumpSupporters, the meme did not establish itself enough to spread to any

significant degree at all; the “firewall effect” here was, by a significant plurality, focused on counter-rebukes – and the bulk of these counter-rebukes revealed a set of norms rooted not in economic or democratic ideals but in literalist Christian gender ideology.

The most significant finding was perhaps that, despite the messengers’ agenda for this meme, the subcultures on both sides of this divide aim ‘weird’ at members of the opposing group. Once “released into the wild,” this meme appears to have made a turn from its intended purpose, slowly divorcing itself from its original target and starting to become another force serving affective polarization between political groupings. It has long been suspected that affect is more salient in political messaging than policy (Dias & Lelkes, 2022); but the bulk of the literature on elections and affective polarization centers on either how elections influence affective polarization (e.g. Lacorato, 2024; McLaughlin et al., 2020; etc.), or how polarized groups frame political candidates, rather than how groups frame each other (e.g. Falcão et al., 2022; Bolsen & Thornton, 2021; etc.). Indeed, some research (e.g. Bolsen & Thornton, 2021) suggests that affective polarization is strongest during elections and focuses on framings of the political candidates in question, receding and allowing a return to some level of agreeableness afterwards (p. 6). These dynamics may be shifting; partisan identities may be becoming the primary factor in affective polarization (Hernández et al., 2021, pp. 1-2). This casts partisanship as “a long-standing expressive identity rather than as an attitude based on the performance or issue positions of parties” (ibid., p. 2; Huddy et al., 2015). Research suggests it is highly possible that explanation for the “increasing affective polarization is related to an increasing relevance of party identification considered as a social identity (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016, 2018; Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019; Klar, 2018)” (Hernández et al.,

2021). Alignment with information on which social identity is constructed is likely to trigger a high degree of ego involvement (ibid.). A memetic perspective, especially when informed by Rathje et al. (2021) and Berger & Milkman (2010), suggests content that triggers fear, anger – and, importantly, disgust (Strauss, 2015; Nam et al., 2017) – are the most powerful competitors when memetic interference occurs. The additional lens of SJT (Hovland et al., 1980) suggests that this content is also highly likely to trigger high ego involvement.

Distasteful/dangerous aberrance (‘weirdness’) are relative to norms of social identity, and are distasteful, dangerous, or aberrant insofar as they threaten the continued power of those norms. Protestant Christianity has long provided a majority of US citizens with frames of reference to construct not just social identity/norms and threat identification, but frames of reference for the social construction of reality itself (c.f. Berger & Luckman, 1967). Although the Bible appears to argue against the legitimacy of transgendered individuals (e.g. Genesis 1:27; Deuteronomy 22:5, etc.), many Protestant denominations do not hold literalist views of the Bible, and many accept homosexuality and transgendered individuals (Gerdtz, 2019). However, evangelicals – which make up a plurality Trump’s Christian support (PRRI, 2024) – rarely do (Zachman, 2024). In fact, Christian Nationalism – an almost exclusively evangelical ideology “that can influence political actions by calling forth a defense of mythological narratives about America’s distinctively Christian heritage and future” – was a “robust predictor of voting for Trump,” even with controls for a host of other ideological positions in the 2016 election (Whitehead et al., 2018). Additionally, in 2024, there was “strong correlation between support for Christian nationalism and vote for President Donald Trump in all 50 states”

(PRRI, 2025). Because the bulk of Trump supporters is both evangelical and cis/hetero-normative (Zachman, 2024), it is likely that threats to these norms would create high ego involvement by triggering disgust at what is, in their view, a deviant, grotesque, indecent, and ‘weird’ (distasteful/dangerous) aberration of sex and gender norms – and the inappropriate permissiveness with which “the left” regards such “aberrations.” Taken together, these theories may help to explain why such ‘weird’ (here, fascist) solutions are considered appropriate among Trump supporters: according to Shoopman (2021), “[n]ot all conservative Christians can be easily dismissed as simple bigots... they are people struggling to remain faithful to the core of their beliefs, trusting in what they perceive to be the authority and truth of their sacred texts. They fear loss of confidence in that authority beyond almost all other concerns” (p. 122). This becomes, in that case, not a question of simply providing equal rights and consideration to all members of society; it becomes an existential threat, and any solution – even ‘weird’ ones – are well worth the cost to solve threats of this perceived magnitude.

On the other side, the value system that gives rise to democracy seems existentially threatened in a distastefully/dangerously aberrant way by ‘fascism’ (Tummala-Narra, 2021, p. 127). Each side, then, will believe they are engaged in a fight not merely against something ‘weird,’ but an existential fight on behalf of their very ethical foundations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was limited in various ways, not the least of which is its limitation to a cross-sectional analysis. Longitudinal studies would be helpful as this particular meme continues to evolve and adapt in discourse within and between ideological enclaves. Additionally, negative frames are no doubt an important aspect of political animus and affective polarization; further research should be conducted to find how political parties have framed each other in the past, if the strategy is gaining in traction, and to what degree this animus contributed to the results of previous elections. Other studies may be able to trace a more complete “life-cycle” of memes of this sort and additionally help researchers gain an understanding of the nature of negative frames that are successful in changing the national conversation as opposed to those that are not. Additionally, the ridicule employed by ‘weird’ against Trump in the 2024 election runs counter to the role of ridicule as described by Warren (2006). This presents at least two questions: first, from a memetic perspective, what happens to the spread of ideological-agenda memes when their ideological outcomes are not achieved? The results of this research suggest that, in this case, the meme adapts, seeking objects of ridicule for which it may be more salient; but not all ideological-agenda memes are ridicule. Second, ridicule has worked to change the outcome of elections before (e.g. Dukakis v. Bush); under what conditions, then, is ridicule effective to prevent, rather than to deflate, political power? The answers to these questions may reveal important truths about political and affective psychology.

Finally, research should be done to understand the degree to which transgender acceptance stimulates not just ego involvement, but the degree to which it might threaten the orientation and terror management strategies of conservative Protestants, conservative Catholics, Christians in general, Protestants in general, Catholics in general, liberal Protestants, liberal Catholics, conservatives in general, liberals in general, and Trump supporters.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to investigate the reception and evolution of the term ‘weird’ as a political meme during and immediately following the 2024 election cycle, using a memetic perspective, Framing Theory, Social Judgment Theory, and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). By examining the discourse on r/WeirdGOP and r/AskTrumpSupporters, this study aimed to understand how ‘weird’ was used to frame Donald Trump, his allies, and his political opponents – and how different communities responded to this framing.

The findings revealed that ‘weird’ became a dominant frame in anti-Trump media, initially replacing more fear-inducing frames such as ‘fascist’ and ‘authoritarian.’ However, over time, the audience agenda in anti-Trump circles – or, at least, the audience agenda in r/WeirdGOP – appears to have shifted the salience of "weird" away from Trump himself and onto his followers. This suggests an adaptation of the meme to maintain its virality.

In r/AskTrumpSupporters, the responses predominantly exhibited a firewall effect, with Trump supporters rejecting the "weird" frame through counter-reproaches and divergent decoding; the most common response indicated fear, disgust, and anger toward transgendered people, and leveled the accusation of ‘weirdness’ back onto the accusers.

This research contributes to the field of Communication by developing the memetic perspective in epidemiological terms: messages (memes) as viruses,

media/message effects as competitors within memetic (viral) interference, and message discrepancy and ego involvement as elements of a firewall (immune system). This helps develop the work of Blackmore, Rushkoff, Dennett, and others – whose growing concern with intellectual contagion and its effects on orientation and epistemology is well placed. In addition, this research reveals a large divide between an increasingly polarized binary between what ideals are held sacrosanct – and what price the protection of these ideals is worth paying.

Future research should explore the longitudinal evolution of political memes, the conditions under which ridicule can effectively influence political outcomes, and the impact of social identity on the reception of political messages. By continuing to investigate these dynamics, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between media, culture, and politics in an increasingly polarized society.

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