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Luis Orlando León Carpio

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A memed Revolution?

Content analysis on how Twitter users used memes as a means for political expressions of dissent during the 11J protests in Cuba

Master Thesis

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Author: Luis Orlando León Carpio, BA

Supervisor: Ing. et Mgr. Kateřina Turková, Ph.D

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Abstract

The present thesis addresses Twitter memes as a means for political expressions of dissent during the protests that took place in Cuba on the 11 of July 2021. It focuses on the nuances in the discourses that memes conveyed regarding the 11J protests and the COVID-19 crisis and it is aimed to the nature of the messages to understand their main features and stance and make inferences about the motivation behind the act of posting. In doing so, content analysis with a mixed approach – quantitative and qualitative, stressing the latter – was applied to the 111 memes found in a time frame consisting of one week, from 8 to 15 July 2021. The analysis permitted us to conclude that memes carried the main and simplified opinions of Cubans, made references to the political and sanitary crises, targeted politicians and their supporters as the main forms of dissent. Politically, memes helped netizens to criticize the Government, and the political and ideological system, among other things, mainly through humor; although serious memes were also present. Memes, primarily statics and recognized as a nucleus content, received between 300 to 1000 likes, and were produced mainly by common users. Surprisingly, most of them were from outside Cuba.

Keywords

Cuba, memes, Twitter, 11J protests, political expression, dissent.

Abstrakt

Tato práce se zabývá memy na Twitteru jako prostředkem pro politické vyjádření nesouhlasu během protestů, které proběhly na Kubě dne 11. července 2021. Zaměřuje se na odlišnosti v diskurzech, které memy zprostředkovaly, a týkaly se protestů 11J a krize COVID-19. Práce se zaměřuje se na povahu sdělení, zkoumá jejich hlavní rysy, a také postoje a motivaci k jejich publikování. Celkem 111 memů nalezených v časovém rámci jednoho týdne, od 8. do 15. července 2021, bylo zkoumáno pomocí kvantitativní i kvalitativní obsahové analýzy s důrazem na kvalitativní postup. Dle výsledků analýzy memy nesly hlavní a zjednodušené názory Kubánců, odkazovaly na politické a jiné krize, zaměřovaly se na politiky a jejich příznivce jako na hlavní formy disentu. Z politického hlediska memy pomohly uživatelům Twitteru kritizovat vládu a politický a ideologický systém mimo jiné především humorem; i když byly nalezeny i vážně míněné memy. Memy, jejichž charakter byl primárně statický, získaly mezi 300 a 1000 lajky a byly vytvářeny a šířeny převážně běžnými uživateli, přičemž většina z nich byla překvapivě odjinud než z Kuby.

Klíčová slova

Kuba, memy, Twitter, 11J protesty, politické vyjádření, disent

Range of thesis: 51 pages to 91984 characters

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.
4. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

Prague, May 2th, 2023

Luis Orlando León Carpio

Acknowledgments

To God for always giving me the resources and the wisdom to use them. To my family, especially my parents and my sister, for the unconditional love and support. To Lolo, my rock, the pillar of my life in these two years in Europe. To my beloved friends, the old and the new ones, for being there despite the distance. To the Mundus family for making me live the most exciting years of my life. To the master's coordinators and professors for the incredible support and the fantastic job running this program with such professionalism. And last but not least, I thank my supervisor, Kateřina Turková, for her excellent job guiding me throughout the process, her patience, helpful advice, and the extra time dedicated to improving my work.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the protestors of the 11J demonstrations in Cuba for their courage, strength, and willingness to impulse a change despite the consequences.

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Approved research proposal

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THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY STUDENT:

Student's surname and given name:
Luis Orlando León Carpio

Start of studies for EMJ (in Aarhus) 2021/2022

Your faculty e-mail:
45190735@fsv.cuni.cz

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Expected date of submission (semester, academic year – example: *SS 2021/2022*)
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Main research question (max. 250 characters):
 How did Cuban Twitter users use memes as means of political dissent during the protests that took place on the 11 of July, 2021?

Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters):
 The word “meme” is attributed to the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins who described memes as a form of cultural propagation (Dawkins, 1976). This concept has been further used to understand how people communicate in online environments. The research usually includes the language of memes (Davidson, 2009), discourse and identity in participatory media through the use of memes (Milner, 2012) and the cultural logic of photo-based meme genres (Shifman, 2013). The definition of meme offers a communication-oriented concept which brings us to the current use of memes as messages on social media: “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367).

Twitter is a prominent space for political interaction (Harrington et al., 2013). Although there is a limited body of work on memes as political expression tools on the Internet, the available research highlights the importance of memes especially in the political communication of the youth. The producers of memes are often citizens; hence memes may be a form of citizen-initiated political participation.

The memes are used as a reaction to political events and news stories, both statics (images & text) and non-statics (videos & gifs). While taking the broad definition, it can be argued that memes precipitated a significant amount of extra e-participation (Dennis, 2018). Twitter is then one of the most suitable platforms for such purposes, in which memes play a significant role in online political expression and entertainment, as seems to have happened during the 11J protests in Cuba. The aim of this study is therefore to characterize the way in which Cuban netizens used Twitter memes to engage in such political events.

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters):

Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) propose a rhetorical structural analysis to understand how memes spread through the Internet. Following the rhetorical structure theory (Mann & Thompson, 1988), the paper states that memes began as an initial visual artifact operating as a kind of condensation nucleus in discourses. Thus, memes could be interpreted in two ways: as single units of texts comprised of a *nucleus* —the core unit that carries the main message— and also as one or more *satellites* conveying information related to the nucleus. “Whole groups of memes can be then categorized as hypertext in which the individual memes are connected through proximity to nuclei and/or satellites” (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018, p. 2868). Then, the evolution of a meme is governed by a combination of the three types of communication logic: a communicative action of *political self-expression* on social media, a form of irreverence and play in digital *games*, and a way of *cultural evolution*.

The first of these logics is particularly related to this study since it is linked to what the theory of participatory culture states. The key characteristic is the nature of the message and its ease of dissemination. A meme acts as a package of political messages that are oversimplified to make it more spreadable. Mukhongo (2020) points out that simplified and memeified political messages can reveal meaningful expressions for collective action and civic engagement, and they can redefine dissent and protest as online political contestation. What may be challenging is defining the dominant narrative of what a protest is, particularly among millennials and Generation Z. To sum up, this means that participatory cultures –through memes, in this case– are being used to express social engagement and political dissent.

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):

In order to address the research question, I intend to utilize a content analysis of the memes with a focus on what is contained in these memes in relation to the collective discourse around the political expression. Content analysis refers to the qualitative method of “identifying the information contained within the texts which can be used to identify a reality external to the text” (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 86). From this understanding, we will be able to form categories of the texts and images in the memes thus forming a ‘coding scheme’.

The qualitative content analysis, through the coding scheme, will allow us to identify patterns of meme creation such as tone, nature of the messages and profile of its creators as well as to assess its level of virality - which means its level of relevance and impact on the different debates. To extract the data, the following keywords and hashtags will be used: Patria Y Vida, Cuba, Sos Cuba and Twitter Cuba, #SosCuba, #PatriaYvida, #11J.

Expected research design (data to be analyzed, for example, the titles of analyzed newspapers and selected time period):

To tackle this, it is intended to select tweets posted in a time frame consisting of the week prior to the occurrence of the protests, July 11 itself, and then the following week. This time frame was selected because it coincides with the peak of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the already struggling economy and crippled the health system. Twitter users helped put the topic of the crisis in Cuba on the international public agenda by spreading the hashtag #SOSCuba, which was positioned among the most shared hashtags worldwide and attracted the attention of many politicians and celebrities who engaged in the discussions and spread of ideas. This, among other factors, inadvertently fuelled the July 11 protest and then gave rise to online discussions around politics and the state of the economy. All tweets within this time frame that meet the criteria of the meme in the context of this research will be analyzed.

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content):

- Abstract

- Introduction

(Overview of the phenomenon, the justification, the relevance and importance, the context and doability)

- Literature Review / Theory

- Social media and political expressions

(Historical overview and current state of research on political participation on social media and its relevance)

- Twitter memes as political messages

(Current state of research on twitter as a platform for political expression, conceptualization of internet memes and discussion of its main affordances)

- Rhetoric and participatory culture on social media

(Presenting the key elements of the structural rhetorical theory and main propositions of participatory culture on social media)

- Methodology

- Research methods (description)
- Dataset and data collection techniques
- Discussion of selected hashtags
- Coding Scheme

- Results

- Discussion and Conclusion

- List of Literature

- Appendices

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

- Alaszewski, A. (2006). *Using Diaries for Social Research*. SAGE.
The book summarizes the development of the method, follows through all stages of research from accessing subjects through design to analyzing diary information as data, and considers how the method can best be exploited and used.
- Harrington, S., Highfield, T., & Bruns, A. (2013). More than a Backchannel: Twitter and Television. *Participations*, 10(1), 405-409.
This article examines the use of Twitter as a technology for the expression of shared fandom in the context of a major, internationally televised annual media event: the Eurovision Song Contest.
- McLoughlin, L., & Southern, R. (2021). By any Memes Necessary? Small Political Acts, Incidental Exposure and Memes during the 2017 UK General Election. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 23(1), 60-84.
This article seeks to understand the role of memes during political campaigns based on their creators, the level of engagement, and what meaningful political information can be derived from them.
- Milner, R. M. (2013). Pop polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 34.
This article examines how memes were used to articulate perspectives on Occupy Wall Street. A corpus of memes commenting on OWS from multiple participatory media networks was analyzed using multimodal critical discourse analysis, indicating that memes facilitated conversation between diverse positions.
- Mukhongo, L. L. (2020). Participatory Media Cultures: Virality, Humour, and Online Political Contestations in Kenya. *Africa Spectrum*, 55(2), 148-169.
The article seeks to discuss varied forms of citizen engagement in the era of Internet viral cultures, ranging from the use of social media for online protest, mainly in the Twittersphere, to the appropriation of protest messages into humorous viral memes.
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(3), 362-377.

This paper re-examines the concept of "meme" in the context of digital culture by revisiting its origin in the way it was debated before the digital era until its spread into social media as a highly visible practice.

- Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT press.
In this book, the author discusses a series of well-known Internet memes—including "Leave Britney Alone," the pepper-spraying cop, LOLCats, Scumbag Steve, and Occupy Wall Street's "We Are the 99 Percent" in order to investigate what they tell us about digital culture. She also offers a novel definition of Internet memes.
- Seiffert-Brockmann, J., Diehl, T., & Dobusch, L. (2018). Memes as games: The evolution of a digital discourse online. *New Media & Society*, 20(8), 2862-2879.
This study proposes a theoretical framework for understanding how and why certain memes prevail as a form of political discourse online.

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

- McVicker, S. M. (2021). *Political Disinformation, Propaganda, and Persuasion in Memes: A Content Analysis of 2020 US Election Political Memes* (Doctoral dissertation, Robert Morris University).
- Huntington, H. E. (2017). *The Affect and Effect of Internet Memes: Assessing Perceptions and Influence of Online User-Generated Political Discourse as Media* (Doctoral dissertation, Colorado State University).
- Kirschner, J. J. (2020). *(Un)Social Media: A Content Analysis of the Centralized Self on Twitter* (Doctoral dissertation, The Claremont Graduate University).

Date / Signature of the student:

02-12-2022

THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY THE ACADEMIC SUPERVISOR:

I confirm that I have consulted this research proposal with the author and that the proposal is related to my field of expertise at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

I agree to be the Thesis supervisor.

Turková Kateřina, November 30, 2022

Nov. 30, 2022

Surname and name of the supervisor

Date / Signature of the supervisor

Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:

Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, by **November 15, 2022**, addressed to the Program Coordinator.

Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office, Mgr. Sandra Štefaniková.

The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM.

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Introduction

While the concept of memes is older than online social networks, the new generations have appropriated it as a new genre of communication, that is helpful for digital interaction and eventually assumed as a new form of political humor. Indeed, memes have become a good ally for people to express their ideas during political events –from crises to natural disasters, protests to elections.

Memes' impact on online communication has drawn the attention of academia, especially interested in how they reflect a significant portion of public opinion on the Internet and how they help shape the different forms of activism and citizens' initiatives that events like the Occupy Wall Street movement, and Trump and Obama's political campaigns have shown (see Milner, 2013; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). Mortensen & Neumayer (2021, p. 2368) put it this way: "Efforts to understand the political role performed by memes have led to the creation of concepts such as 'memetic protest' (Olesen, 2018), 'the memefication of politics' (Dean, 2019), 'the memefication of political discourse' (Bulatovic, 2019), and 'weaponizing memes' (Peters & Allan, 202)". However, such studies usually flip the coin toward the Western, leaving behind particular scenarios concerning the online dynamic of the Global South¹. Furthermore, if taking out the exception of Russia –which has been widely studied on the use of memes (e.g., Denisova, 2019; Shomova, 2022), and China (e.g., Mina, 2014), much less has been researched about how political communication, using memes, usually takes place in non-democratic societies, or countries with a system under authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

As such, this thesis bets on Cuba², a country that lacks democratic values and whose Government is willing to monopolize communications. Arriving late in the Internet era, Cuban Gen-Z also found new channels on social media to express their ideas challenging the official depiction of national affairs: the COVID-19 policymaking and the economic crisis, for example, that has received much attention from social media users within the Island.

¹ As far as this study is concerned, the most interesting piece of work found is a research compilation on humorous memes usage during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the Global South, compiled and edited by Shepherd Mpofu (2021), highlighting mainly Africa.

² According to Martínez Acebal (2023), the character of Cuba is as totalitarian as authoritarian, as in every dictatorship. (p. 88)

Historically, the Cuban Constitution has acknowledged the rights for free association and manifestation (see Article 56 of the 2019 Constitution) as long as they do not challenge the socialist order, thus restricting the emergence of political alternatives. With the affiliation of the media and all kinds of institutions to the official discourse, people with divergent opinions usually find themselves needing a means to express politically. Likewise, the Government ensures surveillance of the most critical members of society. For example, the newly approved Penal Code punishes protestors with the crime of sedition, while legislations such as laws 370 and 35 attempts to regulate online expression against the establishment. Thus, authorities provoke a lack of spaces for pluralistic debates in society, which becomes particularly critical in times of crisis when people feel more than ever the need to express their political discontent.

In 2021, Cuba experienced a series of demonstrations that “were triggered by food and medicine shortages, and the inefficient handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the government” (Keith-Norambuena et al., 2022, p. 1). The causes can also be found in the inner contradictions derived from the centralization of powers and the planned economy of Soviet inspiration; as well as the continued US embargo; among other circumstances that, in the words of the economist Julio Carrazana, can be explained by:

“an economy that, for whatever reason, including the genocidal blockade³ and the current impact of the pandemic, as well as internal inadequacies and paralysis, does not respond sufficiently to its needs for employment, consumption, or its inclusion. Nor does the political system provide enough space for representation and real participation”. (Carrazana in López Segrera, 2021, p. 39).

Authorities exercised violence against peaceful protesters who had taken “to the streets to protest over the economy, shortages of medicines, the response to COVID-19, and harsh restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly” (Amnesty, 2021). As reported by the media (Faiola, 2021), the protests started around the afternoon of the 11th of July in the small town of *San Antonio de los Baños*, 35 km from Havana. They were live-streamed by users on social platforms like Facebook, which provoked a domino effect of massive demonstrations nationwide. The so-called 11J protests rapidly became the biggest since 1994, when Cubans dared to take over Havana streets in the famous

³ The term, coined to the series of economic or political sanctions of the US government over Cuba, approved by President John R. Kennedy in 1961, is highly political. While most of the literature refers to it as an embargo, academic work closer to the Cuban Government's narrative prefers to call it a blockade, which is how the Cuban propaganda apparatus refers to it.

demonstration known as *Maleconazo*. In 2021, the Government response included the highly criticized president's speech calling for a confrontation between 'revolutionaries' (supporters) and 'counterrevolutionaries' (demonstrators) (see Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, 2021) as well as massive arrests – According to the NGO's Cubalex and Justicia 11J, until the submission of this thesis 1812 arbitrary detentions had been registered ever since (Justicia 11J - Detenciones Políticas en Cuba, 2023).

Thus, dissenting in Cuba has always been problematic. With a history of persecution and harassment of the Government towards people opposing the official narrative, it is not a coincidence that many citizens prefer to engage in political discussions from the safety of their homes. It is observable in everyday life of Cubans that memes allow them to unburden themselves since they provide the necessary subtlety to dodge censorship.

Dissent is important in a healthy society. It refers to a disagreement, another perspective, a different thinking, or a contrasting opinion. As a political behavior, dissent is heavily connected to expressing discomfort against the people holding power. Buela (2004) highlights it as a free human attitude in its Theory of Dissent. According to this author, dissent enriches human action and consolidates a plural society while invalidating any homogenizing or totalitarian attempt (Buela, 2004, p. 77). In Western democracies, the right to dissent is taken for granted, but in non-democratic societies, this attitude can cause a real cost for the individual. In his famous essay *The Power of the Powerless*, the Czech politician Vaclav Havel stressed the importance of dissidents exposing the dictatorial nature of the former Soviet Bloc regimes. (Havel, 2018)

The above discussion sets the bar for the basis of this investigation⁴, which focuses on Internet memes as a means of political expressions of dissent during the 11J protests in Cuba. The increasing importance of the Internet language as a barometer of public opinion and its impact on today's political communication of the people makes relevant the proposition of this thesis. It allows me to make great contributions to the state of research about how the expressions of dissent occur in Cuba, where divergent opinions may be considered a crime. Furthermore, the 11J protests remain an understudied event

⁴ The present research is an evolution of a course output that I carried out in 2022 for the final exam of the course Journalism, Media and Cultural Globalization, held by Aarhus University as part of the curricular plan of the current master's degree. The paper was a comparative study on meme usage as political expression in Cuba and Zambia, in co-authorship with my classmate Luckson Sikananu. The paper is also cited in the thesis as Sikananu & León Carpio (2022). Due to being well received by the examiners and obtaining a remarkable grade, I wanted to expand the scope of the research by focusing only on Cuba and explore the phenomena more in-depth.

in academia, with a high risk of being silenced in Cuban universities and receiving less attention outside the country. Regarding memes, there are only a few studies that address their political nature within the Island (e.g., González Marrero, 2020; Ventura Kessel, 2021), but none of them connect with such a major political event nor with Twitter as a platform that encourages the dissenting opinions of the people.

During the 11J protests, memes seemed to be used to express opinions about the Government's response to the crisis, mock politicians and their supporters, and transmit sensitive ideas about the country's situation. Therefore, this thesis aims to look at the nuances in the discourses that memes conveyed concerning the political expressions of dissent during the protests that took place in Cuba on the 11th of July 2021. Massive access to the Internet is a late achievement in the context of Cuban telecommunications. However, Cubans found Twitter affordances attractive for political interactions and quickly learned how to use them for their benefit. While the Government also deployed all its apparatus to homogenize digital public opinion, also through memes, civil society initiative seems to succeed the most. Twitter memes will then be discussed as a form of political expression of dissent. Fuchs (2014) suggests that a significant feature of the Internet is its capability to establish communities. This is evidenced by the emergence of online platforms such as Twitter, which have become global centers of collective action, as demonstrated by the #MeToo movement and the Arab Spring protests. (Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022)

Therefore, and in order to meet the objective of this thesis, two research questions were posed:

RQ1: How did Cuban netizens⁵ use Twitter memes to express political dissent during the protests that took place on the 11th of July 2021?

RQ2: What kind of memes prevailed when engaging in political discussions related to the 11J Protests in Cuba and where did those memes come from?

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, a content analysis of the memes posted on Twitter was undertaken in a time frame of around one week, from the 8th of July to the 15th of July 2021. The thesis has suffered minor changes from the initial proposal submitted in November 2022. Among those changes, we can find, for instance, that the final design included a mixed approach to the content analysis –quantitative and qualitative, initially intended to be only qualitative. This was done for the analysis to gain depth. Moreover,

⁵ The people who actively participate in online communities or has a significant online presence.

the initial intention was to address a two-week timeframe narrowed down to only one due to the overwhelming amount of data retrieved. Such a methodology was chosen since it permits a deep look at the nature of the messages, allowing me to make inferences on the political motivation behind posting a meme, the contextual implications, and memes' main features, which offered a remarkable depiction of meme production in Cuba. Content analysis is also a valuable tool in terms of feasibility.

The thesis has therefore been laid out in three main sections. The first one highlights the current state of research regarding social media as a means of political expression nowadays. It also offers a set of main features of memes in the Twitter context as well as a discussion on the evolution of the concept of memes while finding the right definition that aligns with the objective of this research. Finally, it lays down a theoretical framework for understanding memes and their use as political messages.

The second section deals with the research methods used. It points out the strengths of the content analysis for the present thesis goals: the use of a codebook with up to three levels of coding to lead the analysis, the data collection process using hashtags which allows retrieving tweets related to the expressions of dissent, and other forms of search criteria.

The third chapter presents the findings, thus answering the two research questions. It also discusses how memes were used in Cuba and the implications of these findings for the context of political communication and the narrative of the 11J protests. Additional sections discuss the findings, offer a summary of the limitations, recommendations for future research, and the main conclusions. A final section gathers the main appendices of the thesis.

1. Literature review and theoretical framework

1.1 *Political expressions in the online realm*

The use of social media for political purposes has been of interest in academia since its emergence more than 20 years ago. While diverse approaches have led to different findings (some of them even contrasting), it is evident that civil society has turned to digital platforms with new ways of political engagement. According to Boulianne (2020), there is a positive correlation between the use of digital media – understood as all kinds of platforms offered in the online realm: blogs, campaign websites, and social media – and participation in different forms of ‘real world’ politics, suggesting an increase while social networks developed over time. Based on survey data, “more than 300 studies have been published on the relationship between digital media and engagement in civic and political life”. (Boulianne, 2020, p. 947)

The nature of social media inherently leads to different forms of political behavior. In previous research, Boulianne (2019) highlighted the primary uses of social media that lead to some political awareness. First, users engage in platforms like Facebook or Twitter for informational purposes. Social media “exposes people to information about political issues or current events” (Boulianne, 2019, p. 40). There is some “latent capacity” to politically engage on social media because even though people do not explore them with an explicit political move, they still run into political information that they consume from the “corner of the eye” (Denisova, 2019, p. 16); second, social media have become essential nodes for social bonding that, one way or another, lead to some form of political participation; people can share their political ideas, find peers with similar views and coexist with (or confront) other political views (Boulianne, 2019). They organize around cultural and political identities, call for collective action and call out the authorities (Denisova, 2019).

Furthermore, political expression has been ranked as one of the primary uses by the scholarship. Political information spreads easily on social media with a capacity to reach millions in a few minutes thus enhancing people’s ability to raise discussions on a given issue which increases the levels of political knowledge and so the possibility of a ‘real-world’ action, at least in democratic societies (Boulianne, 2019). “The effects of social media use on participation are larger for political expression and smaller for

informational uses, but the magnitude of these effects depends on political context” (Boulianne, 2019, p. 39).

Social media, in fact, can work as a virtual platform in times of protests. Jost et al. (2018) state that platforms like Facebook and Twitter are key for informational exchange regarding logistics and coordination. “News about transportation, turnout, police presence, violence, medical services, and legal support is spread quickly and efficiently through social media channels” (Jost et al., 2018, p. 111). Furthermore, this study highlights that social media allows users to spread the content of propaganda that aligns with their interests and goals from one side to another so that the motivation and emotions of the protests are heard by the group members, thus encouraging others to take action. “The structural characteristics of online social networks, which may differ as a function of the political ideology, have important implications for the information exposure and success or failure of the organizational efforts” (Jost et al., 2018, p. 112).

This idea is vital to understanding the role of memes in political expressions of dissent, mainly in times of protest, since the attractiveness of memes, as well as the simplicity of their nature, make them suitable to carry the right messages and reach wider audiences. This does not mean that memes are merely used to organize protests, but they certainly contribute to disseminating important information. Therefore, Denisova (2019), who has deeply studied the role of memes in such an approach, includes them in those new communications formats offered by social media platforms that are heavily influential in spreading political information and contributing to people’s political knowledge. Memes are part of a whole universe of “novel communication genres such as hashtags, tweets, vines, snaps” (and now reels and tik-toks) “which create new means of expression that had not existed before the digital era” (Denisova, 2019, p. 17).

A significant amount of research then claims that political engagement in social media and its correlation with offline forms has taken on a ‘revolutionary’ character, largely due to the ways internet users currently participate in politics (Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022). However, this ‘revolution’ should not be taken for granted since the current stage of research is often obscure in terms of the extent to which online political expression affects offline political forms and vice versa. At first glance, citizens seem to have an unstoppable force in their hands, but reality often leads in a different direction. For example, Boulianne (2019) stresses the fact that “political expression on social media has produced a voluminous amount of data about citizens’ political views, voting preferences, and thoughts about current events (...) (which) provides opportunities for

state surveillance” (p. 50). This seems to be the reality of citizens in countries where democracy is failing or under authoritarian regimes. In such political systems, there can be actual consequences to expressing political views. There, individuals typically decide to engage in politics or not, depending on the potential advantages and disadvantages involved.

Since the emergence of the Internet, scholars have reminded us that, even with its capacity for quick communication and interaction, the online world is a reflection of the offline reality that “is still limited by human nature and social and political structures” (Denisova, 2019, p. 13). Even some current phenomena related to social media, such as echo chambers, existed in social life before and are often considered a digital translation of an established social behavior (Denisova, 2019). Moreover, the Internet’s potential for political expression is heavily dependent on political awareness –something that public opinion studies have shown us as a vulnerability to elites’ manipulation and highly reliable on digital media literacy. Referring to the latter, Denisova (2019, p 14), drawing from Jenkins (2009), points to some threats people might face when being exposed to social media: according to her, differences in technology access among individuals may lead to *participation gaps*; furthermore, the vast amount of information available makes it difficult for individuals to process it all on their own which may cause a *transparency problem*; finally, there is an *ethic challenge* because, according to her, specific individuals, primarily children and elders, find it challenging to be aware of certain risks of personal damage concerning privacy and prestige.

We should not think that the potentials of the Internet are only used by civil society. Instead, we should admit that elites possess sufficient means to counterattack civil society’s initiatives in different forms. In Cuba, our case study, the Government seems to invest in the creation of pro-government social media profiles. Similar cases of study in either non-democratic or authoritarian societies like Venezuela and Ukraine point in this direction (e.g., Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020). Still, the fact that governments feel forced to invest in the digital realm means that political expressions of dissent on social media play a significant role among a fraction of the population. Here, people usually turn to the digital environment to engage politically despite the risk derived from it.

Nonetheless, the use of social media for political expression is only sometimes taken for granted. The existing state of research often obscures their capacity for collective action as they usually measure their impact according to the offline

repercussions. As such, the negative term slacktivism⁶ emerged to explain some sort of lazy political engagement of many on social media. However, the literature on slacktivism needs to be more concrete in its final statements. Whereas part of the scholarship argues that it is only used as an image self-regulation in digital spaces, on the other hand, others argue that those firsts token acts help predict more substantial efforts for engagement (Noland, 2020). In any case, meme production cannot be categorized as slacktivism because making memes involves a playful behavior with a more intricate nature. Critics who dismiss those practices fail to acknowledge specific political circumstances, such as in authoritarian societies like Cuba, where engaging in real-life political activities out of the scope of the Government may pose a risk to one's integrity (Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022).

In this respect, Boulianne (2019) found enough evidence to suggest that in countries where the traditional media system is not independent, the capacity for online political expression to become an "offline action" is less likely to occur. As she points out:

"In countries without a free and independent press, social media may offer the only form of political engagement possible. Protesting in the street or voting in an election may not be options in some political systems, leaving citizens to express their political discontent in (relatively) safer online spaces, such as on social networking sites" (Boulianne, 2019, p. 41).

The protests in Cuba on July 11th, 2021, were an interesting case as it has been reported how a live transmission on Facebook fueled massive demonstrations and riots throughout the country. Social media seemed to serve as an indispensable tool to call for collective action and engage in offline political activism. However, Cuba's existing economic and political context was determinant in the outcome of these protests beyond social media use. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies on the real impact of social media on the protests and the other way around. I argue that the use of social media meant an alternative form, some contributing tool for political activism, as other studies seem to suggest; in Russian protests, for example, the use of social media content such as memes

⁶ "Slacktivism can be defined as token displays of support for a cause, frequently, though not exclusively, done in virtual spaces without the intention or willingness to put forth significant effort in pursuit of social change (Kristofferson et al., 2013). Slacktivism can take the form of wearing a ribbon or wristband, 'liking' or 'sharing' a post on Facebook, or retweeting on Twitter. Slacktivism stands in contrast to traditional forms of activism such as volunteering, staging a sit-in, donating money, or joining a campaign" (Noland, 2020, p. 265).

“allowed users to express their political opinions and emotions (...) shape the narratives of protest and the stories of the conflict between the authorities and the protesters” (Shomova, 2022, p. 238).

In Turkey, a study published in 2022 found that people's real-world political participation is linked to how they share alternative opinions and different political ideas on social networks (Toros & Toros, 2022). When comparing Africa and Latin America, we can find small differences. In some cases, the correlation between Internet use and political participation is still positive but relatively modest. For instance, in Mexico, political culture might be underdeveloped. Despite the democratic transition and the widespread use of the Internet, technology has not been able to impact politically relevant behaviors significantly (Echevarría, Meyer, & Cansino, 2016, pp. 305-306). Nevertheless, even this is conditioned by pre-existing circumstances and the specific political context of the country.

In Kenya, on the other hand, online political participation does play a significant role in national political discussions. There, technologies have introduced a new culture for participation regardless of the purpose, sometimes ludic, and others it is done to spread a divergent narrative for contested events such as elections (Mukhongo, 2020). In sum, they have opened spaces for the youth to engage in discussions that are key to understanding the new ways political expressions take place in developing democracies. (Mukhongo, 2022)

To sum up, scholarship has not found a consensus on how to effectively measure the online political engagement and its “real impact” on offline forms of political behavior, and it is yet to depict its scope fully. However, the role of social media and its main affordances on political expressions of dissent is undeniable. I argue that the real impact of social media on political expressions of dissent should not be considered only to the extent to which online forms affect offline behavior but rather what these new forms add to the current state of political expressions. The present thesis focuses its attention on the message of Internet memes to better depict the reality of online political discussion, pointing out that Cuba is a non-democratic society and social media has offered an alternative-free space for netizens to express their political dissent.

1.2 The political nature of Twitter memes

Amidst the vast sea of online engagement, Twitter has become a powerful platform for political discourse, where communities are formed to share information

(Oltmann, Cooper, & Proferes, 2020), providing unique pieces of news that cannot be found elsewhere, helping in the organization of protests and rallies, enabling users to engage with political movements, and fostering an environment where individuals can freely share their opinions with peers (Valenzuela, 2013). Twitter has also “helped spread false information but seldom functioned as a self-correcting marketplace of ideas” and “has been used specifically in connection with protests, both large and small, local and global” (Oltmann, Cooper, & Proferes, 2020, p. 3) as well as to target political elites and discuss relevant affairs. In non-democratic societies like Cuba, the platform has opened a space for political discussions, allowing citizens to engage in debates that they otherwise would not have access. As Denisova (2019) points out: “Twitter is more liberating as it permits the exploitation of pseudonyms and does not require the disclosure of personal information and real-life relationship ties with other users” (p.15). Thus, in countries with limited freedom of speech, the micro-blogging site works to canalize certain kinds of discourses other than those dictated by the Establishment.

While there is not a significant amount of research on the use of memes as tools for political expression on platforms like Twitter, the existing studies indicate that in numerous significant events, these methods of communication are becoming increasingly vital as a means of political communication among young people (Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022). To take an example, in the UK “the most common producers of memes are citizens suggesting that memes may be a form of citizen-initiated political participation.” (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021, p. 60)

The term “meme” was coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976), who defined it as a means of cultural transmission in which individuals seek to convey shared social memories or cultural concepts. This early conception of a meme as a replicable cultural unit, however, has been contested from the biological perspective by pointing out weaknesses in Dawkins’ parallelism between memes and genes since the changing nature of the former contradicts the nature of the latter, leading to different outcomes (i.e., whereas the purpose of a meme is to change and be remixed mutations in genes might lead to the organism failure). Even within the field of social sciences, the novel concept received criticism for being similar to existing notions of ‘ideas’ and ‘cultural patterns,’ and nowadays, defining memes remains a challenge. (Denisova, 2019)

Narrowing down the term is the key to succeeding in defining it. That is why studies have approached it from psychology, computer science, and narratology. The

notion of memes has been employed in the domains of media and communications research to understand how individuals interact with each other in digital spaces.

Among the literature oriented to memes, we can find research on the proper terminology of memes or their impact during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Davidson, 2009; Murru & Vicari, 2021), the logic of culture on memes (Shifman, 2014), and identity and discourse of memes (Milner, 2013), among others. While Dawkins originally conceptualized memes as shared cultural units like cooking techniques, musical melodies, and fashion trends, which bear similarities to contemporary internet memes in terms of their connection to culture and virality, the current understanding of memes in digital culture is more specific.

McLoughlin & Southern (2021) conceptualizes Internet memes as forms of the content generated by Internet users with recognizable features and shared attributes that make them stand out from other types of similar content. The literature often refers to them as highly replicable posts, successful among the youth, and with a limited lifetime. Nooney & Portwood-Stacer (2014) understand them as “digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and then are appropriate, re-coded and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from” (p.249). On the other hand, Denisova (2019) prefers a linguistic conceptualization of memes, which helps analyze them concerning the discourses contained within. To her, memes are “the context-bound viral texts that proliferate on mutation and replication. They (memes) are remarkably versatile for meaning-making, emotion-sharing, and attention-grabbing in the oversaturated Internet environment” (p.10).

However, all these definitions derive from Shifman’s (2013) work, which presents a more straightforward and improved portrayal of how contemporary digital culture perceives the concept, resulting in a communication-focused definition rooted in Dawkin’s approach: “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). This conceptualization is more appropriate for understanding memes across platforms and their journey among digital communities. Even though this research aims to analyze Twitter memes, I acknowledge that memes effectively travel from one platform to another regardless of their format, either memeified tweets, video tik-toks, or Instagram reels.

Many meme studies focus on their humorous nature (e.g., Allan, 2022; Mpofu, 2021; Davidson, 2009), highlighting the use of parody, satire, sarcasm, irony, and comedy

as tools for exposing hypocrisy among the people holding power, among other purposes. Authors usually refer to them as content that possesses intertextual references, non-compliant attitudes, and intricate layers of political and cultural knowledge –which does not mean that the message is less straightforward but that they usually have an inner meaning. (Denisova, 2019; Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022). Shifman (2013) states that memes’ messages contain three main dimensions that make them suitable for replication: ‘content,’ ‘form,’ and ‘stance’ (p. 367), which, together with humor, contribute to their success. Parody, for example, has been historically used for political criticism, like how resistant memes are distributed in contemporary digital environments, in a process that Denisova (2019) successfully relates to the carnival’s ‘inside out’ rationality (p.36).

However, playfulness does not mean humor by nature. According to Mortensen & Neumeyer (2021), memes’ political inclination is often carried out through comedy, but not necessarily so. For example, in an analysis of memes published on the Nordic Resistance Movement, a neo-Nazi group, Askanius & Keller (2021) investigated the “memeification of white supremacism” (p. 2522) and determined that the memes aid in the normalization of far-right ideologies also with serious, forceful threats and depiction of “murder fantasies”.

According to Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018), memes possess three distinctive characteristics within the digital environment: Firstly, they are strongly connected to specific digital communities regarding their stance and goals. Secondly, they rely on remixing practices. Thirdly, memes are primarily visual. On the other hand, Denisova (2019) sees memes as artifacts that spread through the Internet freely and are not tied to any particular group. For example, the Pepe the Frog icon was initially created for a comic but was later appropriated, remixed, and recontextualized by pro-Trump and far-right groups to express extreme sentiments. Memes typically form a common language that anyone can use, facilitating conversations and serving as a vital component of public discourse (Denisova, 2019). However, they are usually nonsensical to outsiders as they are embedded in the culture that created them (Lukács, 2021). For instance, the Occupy Wall Street Movement utilized memes to merge contextual populist arguments with popular texts, thus creating a public discourse in which different opinions were considered (Milner, 2013).

Mememes can also be used to react to various political and news events, as found by McLoughlin & Southern (2021). Not in vain, users tend to express their opinions in the comment section of the posts by using a wide range of meme formats, from templates to

viral content. The study then divides memes into statics (images and text) and non-statics (videos and gifs). It concludes that liking and sharing posts with content related to politics also means added political engagement in the online realm. In the referred study, citizens produced most of the memes; nonetheless, the ones shared by elites, ranging from meme pages to media companies and organizations, garnered more attention, given that they were the most frequently viewed and circulated materials.

During elections in Kenya, netizens use memes to convey humorous messages with political contestation purposes (Mukhongo, 2020). The author of that research finds it unclear what drives individuals to engage in online political dissent and contends that digital activism and participation are not a consequence of new technologies but rather an alternative mode of self-expression and a way for activists to reach wider audiences (Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022). Nevertheless, Mukhongo (2020) argues that although many people who participated in online Kenyan protests did not attend the on-street demonstrations across the country, Twitter played a vital role as a mobilizing platform prompting Internet users to go out onto the streets. The study thus concludes that:

“While we might be tempted to dismiss playful civic engagement and viral memes as just being funny ‘cat’ memes, the cases discussed above help show that such participatory cultures have a role to play in driving political contestation and mobilization for collective action” (Mukhongo, 2020, p. 165).

To sum up, in the last two decades social media have become a means for citizens to voice unconventional political beliefs, questions political leaders, and for activists to extend their reach to a larger audience. Memes have played a significant role in online political expression and playfulness on Twitter, which has been one of the most widely used platform for such purposes. Finally, Shifman’s (2013) concept is the most suitable for the objective of this thesis as she understands memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process” (p. 367).

1.2.1 From tactical media and participatory cultures to the rhetorical structure theory

The current state of research on memes and their impact on political participation still needs to be more conclusive. Although some studies suggest that political memes on social media may not necessarily lead to offline political participation, they recognize them as a form of political expression. Political participation is not the only purpose of

memes, as it will be discussed later in this chapter, but users engage in political discussions by using a language, or a form of communication that is specific to the Internet and therefore difficult to read by outsiders. Thus, the nature of participatory cultures is also shaped using memes. This represents an advantage in authoritarian regimes where ambiguity becomes crucial to avoid censorship by those who control public discourse (Mina, 2014). Therefore, it is expected that similar patterns of meme usage will emerge in the case of the 11J protests in Cuba.

Not many studies have investigated how memes function as political frames. According to Seffert-Brockmann et al. (2018), scholars in communication have yet to examine how participatory engagement with memes influences the prevailing political discourse concerning several political affairs, such as elections, candidates, and parties. However, the existing body of research offers hints to dig deeper into such considerations. Among the theories that have tried to explain the political inherence of memes, we can find radical democracy, tactical media, and participatory cultures.

When communicating on social media, people tend to stress the differences against those who do not share the same standpoint or political stance. According to Mortensen and Neaumeier (2021), this is what radical democracy theory states together with the most critical elements of democracy: ‘conflict’ and ‘dissent.’ The theory brings important concepts like plurality and freedom of speech to online discussions and, most importantly, the constructions of a ‘we’ and a ‘them’ as it assumes that online discussions emerge around communities. Here, “memes offer a creative and playful way for groups to express their identity and to raise their voice” (Mortensen & Neaumeier, 2021, p. 2370). However, while it is tempting to make such an allegory, I have seen that what is happening on social media is usually a reflection of ‘real-world’ political relations. Therefore, this theory might fall under the risk of missing essential patterns of societies with low literacy in democratic values.

Tactical media, on the other hand, sees the mere “act of communication as activism” (Denisova, 2019, p.18). The author says that the concept draws from artistic expressions such as Dada and Culture Jamming and reflects that communication and art merge with politics. Following this approach, people find a way to discuss the political issues affecting them in art and other kinds of messages. However, it does not necessarily lead to an action. “Tactical Media are ‘actions in their own right’ and do not require an offline extension of activism to be proven right” (Denisova, 2019, p. 18). Hence, the theory asserts how people interact on social media with user-generated content like

memes to express their political ideas of dissent in clear contrast with the claims of slacktivism. Moreover, this approach acknowledges the scenarios where it is either difficult or impossible for civil society to engage in offline action.

Mememes as tactical media are strongly connected to the main propositions of the Theory of Participatory Cultures. It states, for example, that messages should be constructed in a simple and easily-to-consume way to spread rapidly across communities. A meme serves as a simplified political message that is designed to increase its spreadability (Mukhongo, 2020). Participatory culture discusses the emerging “media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (Jenkins, 2009, p.8). Users carry out this, the theory argues, through online affiliations in affinity spaces to establish problem-solving collaborations, spread information, or express themselves through new means and genres. As Jenkins, (2009, p. 6) states: “participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement” that, however, “carries the risk of overlooking or trivializing major underlying issues.” (Mukhongo, 2020, p.157)

Nevertheless, it is crucial to consider that memes are a necessary element of those participatory cultures when analyzing online political expressions of dissent. As Mukhongo (2020, p. 156) points out, “simplified and memeified political messages can reveal meaningful expressions for collective action and civic engagement, and how they are redefining dissent and protest as online political contestation,” which, according to her, “is challenging the dominant narrative of what a protest is, particularly among millennials and Generation Z.” (p. 156). Overall, I argue that participatory cultures also utilize memes to convey messages of social involvement and political disagreement.

It is then necessary to draw from the main ideas of tactical media and participatory culture to better depict how memes contribute to the political expressions of dissent on social media. Going deeper, Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) propose a rhetorical structural analysis to understand how memes spread through the Internet. I acknowledge that virality is critical to understanding where the public discourses are moving, although the aim of this thesis does not look at the viral potential of memes in themselves (or how they spread through social networks). However, and in order to know what kinds of memes should be analyzed, it is important to see how some memes prevail over others in times of political events of relevance.

Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) state that memes originate as an artifact primarily visual that serves as a condensed focal point for a given discourse. Those memes are characterized by having a simple but not simplistic message. What happens next is a rapid expansion of the world of those original memes which connects and relates to others that are based on the original. To explain this, the authors of the cited study draw from the rhetorical structure theory (Mann & Thompson, 1988). Thus, they interpret memes as:

“single units of texts which are comprised of a nucleus –the core unit that carry the main message– and second, as one or more satellites conveying information related to the nucleus (...) Whole groups of memes can be then categorized as a kind of hypertext in which the individual memes are connected through proximity to nuclei and/or satellites” (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018, p. 2868).

The lifetime of a meme tends to be short and very contextual. Most importantly, it must demonstrate a strong capacity for appropriation, low-cost production and imitation of the cultural unit, as built from Shifman’s (2013) concept. Furthermore, “meme selection and mutation are driven by a cooperative combination of three types of communication logic: wasteful play online, social media political expression, and cultural evolution” (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018, p. 2862).

Similar to the memetic dimension drawn from Dawkins' (1976) definition, the term *cultural evolution* (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018, p. 2868) can be related to the focus of primary studies on memetic culture. According to Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018), it refers to how individuals adopt and utilize elements of culture to create and engage with other members of digital communities merely for entertainment purposes. The article argues that Internet memes become prevalent when they go viral and require minimal cost. As individual expression through a single meme is limited, the collaboration of many is necessary. (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018)

Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) also see memes as *games*, highlighting their playful dimension. Memes are born by the desire to create rather than a specific objective. Although memes can have effects beyond games, the theory notes that this is not the main reason for their creation. Instead, creating and sharing digital content is valued more than any possible outcome, and the experience is more important than the results. According to the authors, play is a critical component in promoting social cohesion in online communities.

This does not mean that memes should be dismissed as tools for political expression on social platforms like Twitter because, first and foremost, “everything is

somehow political,” as an old saying states. Therefore, “every act of playing bears the potential of being meaningful beyond the act of playing. Even though the user might not intend his playful expression to be more than just fun, it could very well happen to be”. (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018, p. 2867).

Sikananu and León Carpio (2022) argue that individuals’ production and dissemination of memes are influenced by pre-existing factors, such as their perception bias, exposure to news, political knowledge, and awareness. Consequently, Seiffert Brockmann et al. (2018) suggest that memes can serve as a shared reference point for political discussions and actions. Online communities’ members often engage in a political game that contributes to shaping common political beliefs, as evident in the modification and reproduction of memes in new forms and styles based on the users’ political inclinations. Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) thus conclude that “when combined with the notion of games and play, a pattern of meme diffusion should materialize that, although somewhat chaotic, incorporates features of both political expression and irreverence” (p. 2867).

The preceding discussion highlights the importance of examining the political aspect of memes in analyzing their usage as tools for the expression of dissent during the July 11th protests in Cuba. By incorporating the fundamental principles of tactical media, participatory culture theory, and rhetorical structure theory, I aim to examine the nature of memes as a means of political dissent and how they could impact participatory internet culture in a nation where democratic values are either absent or in a state of crisis.

2. Methods and Data

This thesis analyzes the memes published by Cuban Twitter users in a time frame consisting of one week: from the 8th to the 15th of July. The focus of the study is to look at what is contained within the memes around the collective discourse related to the expression of dissent among netizens. The observation period was set with the intention to look at the evolution of political expression while an unexpected event develops, in this case, the biggest protests in the last 30 years of Cuban history, thus changing the dynamics of memes production, engagement, and even an alleged change of tones, given the seriousness of the situation, and the place where most of the memes were produced. It is worth noting that shortly after the occurrence of the protests the Internet in Cuba suffered a complete shutdown that lasted at least 48 hours (Yucabyte, 2021). The thesis seeks to understand how people reacted to it and how the dynamics of political expression were affected on the Twittersphere.

Before the social outburst, social media users were already discussing political issues focused on the government's handling of the economy, which was already struggling, and the health system, which was in a state of crisis due to the Covid pandemic. These factors, along with others, inadvertently contributed to the escalation of the protests. I understand in the context of this research that memes were just one of many forms of online political expression on Twitter but also an essential element of information and opinion diffusion, so they helped frame the 11J narrative. Furthermore, in a country where the law limits the right to protest, I seek to understand how memes convey netizens' need to express dissent as the only safe way to join a cause or simply because they lack spaces for political discussion that welcome dissent in the offline world. Therefore, tweets that meet the criteria of a meme: "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" (Shifman, 2013, p. 367) will be analyzed. With that in mind, it is essential to recall the research questions:

RQ1: How did Cuban netizens use Twitter memes to express political dissent during the protests that took place on the 11th of July 2021?

RQ2: What kind of memes prevailed when engaging in political discussions related to the 11J Protests in Cuba and where did those memes come from?

2.1 Data Collection

Data collection was possible by using the online tool exportcomments.com. This platform is gaining notoriety mainly among companies aiming to search for trending topics on social media. Likewise, academic studies have benefited from it since it offers more accessible ways to scrape highly reliable data for scientific research. Many studies have used this tool for qualitative analysis of the reaction to posts and other topics (Fuchs, 2021; Mehmet, Callaghan, & Lewis, 2021) since it groups the data in Excel files with important information such as the number of comments, likes, retweets, IP location, date, and account profile, among others.

Search criteria were defined first using the Twitter Advanced search tool, which has been acknowledged as a highly effective resource for scientific research by academic institutions like Aarhus University in Denmark (Harlung, 2023). The search focused on hashtags #SosCuba, #PatriaYvida, #11J, and #TwitterCuba. The time frame was restricted from the 8th of July 2021 to the 15th of July 2021. The link to the search results, which resulted from using the “Latest” tab since it is the one that gives data in chronological order, was then copied/pasted on exportcomments.com, which scraped the data in an Excel file. An example of the search looks like this:

```
(#SOSCuba OR #11J OR #PatriaYVida OR #TwitterCuba) lang:es until:2021-07-15 since:2021-07-08
```

The retrieved data consisted of 44 452 tweets, purposely selected according to the standards of qualitative research sampling (Saldaña, 2021). As stated above, first and foremost, this thesis aims to analyze only the tweets that fall under the definition of a meme. So, tweets not meeting the criteria will be excluded from the analysis. It is worth noting that a preliminary coding of engagement that considers the number of likes, comments, and retweets was applied to all tweets to determine whether they fall under the concept of a meme. This thesis considers virality a precondition for online content to become a meme. Non-viral tweets are highly unlikely to be appropriated, remixed, and spread. So, they must be taken out of consideration. Tweets with less than 100 likes were excluded from the analysis.

Other exclusion criteria included spam, posts involving statements that did not include content related to the political event under study, posts that did not show any form of dissent, and content generated by bots. Bot detection was done following the four-step process proposed by Mehmet, Callaghan, & Lewis (2021) in which firstly, it is required

to establish exclusion criteria for the data, as stated in the previous paragraph; secondly, I proceeded on a manual cleansing; thirdly, I processed the data by using tools like Botometer, and fourthly, I went back to manually reviewing the remaining data based on the guidelines of the study above. In the process, five bots were detected. After a rigorous manual review of the tweets, 111 memes were selected for analysis.

2.2 Hashtags

For the present study, the data was collected based on the criteria of the most used hashtags. They are essential elements on social media, mainly Twitter, to understand how information is spread throughout the platform. They carry vital words connecting tweets around one topic while bringing communities together. Typically, Twitter shows “a deliberate use of hashtagged tweets by users as a means of sharing emerging information” (Bruns & Burgess, 2015, p. 18). In political activism, Simpson (2018) points out how users include hashtags to express a variety of sentiments, such as “solidarity and victimhood,” along with the everyday use of “aggregate discussion.” (p. 237)

1.#PatriaYVida

The 11J protests found inspiration in the phrase ‘Patria y Vida’ or ‘Homeland and Life.’ This expression, coined by a group of Cuban musicians in exile and some still on the island, has become a galvanizing force for the people. Interestingly, the name of the song that popularized this phrase, also titled ‘Patria y Vida,’ is a reversal of the widely known motto of the Cuban Revolution, ‘Patria o Muerte’ (Homeland or Death). According to Lopez (2021), the protest movement adopted this phrase to criticize the government’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, which caused a severe economic crisis. The people chanted this phrase to express their dissent and draw attention to their demands in the protests or in social media discussions.

2.#SOSCuba

The first reports of the emergence of this hashtag took place at the beginning of July 2021 amidst the peak of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cuba, when the healthcare system was heavily overwhelmed, and the government attempted to downplay the actual effects of the pandemic through official channels. Citizens turned to Twitter to express their complaints, utilizing this hashtag to draw attention globally, and succeeded in doing so shortly after the crisis started. #SOSCuba became the leading trending topic on the Island during the climax of the protests on July 11th and 12th (González & Maseda, 2022). For two days, it became the number one trending topic in

six countries and number two in another four (Cazadores de Fake News, 2021). Many well-known celebrities, particularly among the youth, such as Mia Khalifa, Camila Cabello, Ricky Martin, Daddy Yankee, and Residente, tweeted the hashtag to show support.

3. #TwitterCuba

This hashtag was observed while searching on the others. It served as a reference for one of the many Twitter communities in Cuba. Twitter Cuba, the community, is mainly integrated by young people that share common interests and political stances related to change and dissent, as well as meme creation, among other current topics. This community is highly referred to by some of the meme makers that hold accounts with more than 40k followers. This hashtag was used to call for action when a famous meme creator, the so-called @YoUsoMiNasobuco, was imprisoned for protesting. The Twitter community was mobilized to demand its member's immediate release.

2.3 Codebook

A mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative content analysis was conducted on the selected memes inductively and deductively to address the research questions. As noted by Hall (2018, p. 395): "Content analysis is (...) an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the actual and symbolic content of all forms of recorded communication, including not only text, and also visual and aural data". The analysis was carried out considering the mere fact that memes are highly contextual. So the emphasis was on the qualitative dimension, stressing the context, type, and character of the researched materials. Content analysis allows one to make "replicable and valid inferences from data to their context." (Neuendorf, 2002, p.1; in Hall, 2018, p. 395)

However, interpreting any user-generated content, either images or texts, involves interpreting meanings heavily dependent on communicative framing. So this process has been considered a challenge. My position as the researcher was determinant to the outcome of this thesis since I am a young Cuban journalist with sufficient political knowledge of Cuba's current affairs to decode most of the inner meanings in the units of analysis. Thus, I could determine the subtle nuances in the discursive choices of Internet users in Cuba and how memes allowed them to interpret the political and sanitary crisis concerning the 11J protests.

Following such understanding, it was possible to form classifications in the memes, resulting in the development of 'code book' that allows one "to search for topics

across data and thereby identify patterns and what stands out from patterns” (Mihas, 2019, p. 2). The current codebook includes the following main categories: Engagement, Format, Form of dissent, Meme creators, Origin of the meme, Political themes, Tone, and Type of meme.

The engagement was measured by counting the number of likes in every meme. More than 1000 likes are accompanied by many retweets, comments, and citations, so this meme is considered to have a high engagement. Medium engagement is considered when a meme has less than 1000 likes, while low engagement is considered with less than 300 likes. It is worth noting that Twitter communities in Cuba are relatively small, so virality was approached cautiously in many cases by reducing the numbers to suit the data collected.

The code Format refers to the main characteristic of the meme’s content. As stated in the literature review, memes can be static when they are made of a piece of text or an image; and non-static if they are made of a gif or a video.

The form of dissent refers to how the meme’s content is approached to express a political message of dissent. This code was created deductively according to the patterns found in the memes. Twitter users generally expressed their dissent by either celebrating achievements, reacting to events, targeting politicians and Government supporters, or simply expressing a political opinion.

Furthermore, it is of interest in this thesis to look at who is creating those memes and whether they were elite, or citizen made. This is possible by looking at the profile of Twitter users. Elite-made memes are those generated from accounts belonging to organizations/media outlets, politicians, opinion leaders, celebrities, and activists. In contrast, ordinary-citizen memes are those generated by ordinary Twitter users (those with an average level of interaction) or influencers (the so-called meme-makers who manage to have more than 11k⁷ followers in their accounts).

Similarly, a code on the meme’s origin was included, as tools like exportcomments.com show data referring to the IP location. In a highly polarized country like Cuba, with severe restrictions on Internet usage for expressions, and a vast ex-pat community, such information is critical to understanding the flow of political engagement

⁷ The eleven-thousand number was the highest number of followers found in the profiles belonging to ordinary users. I noticed that above that number, users tended to be way more influential, and their number of followers jumped up to much higher as well as their meme’s engagement. It was observable that most of the profiles with above 11k followers were better curated and more dedicated to the creation of content, mostly memes.

among Cubans. Moreover, the 11J protests drew international attention and caused deep online discussions worldwide. However, as this automated tool provides only the location based on the IP information, a further analysis was carried out. The user's profile allowed me to compare and occasionally update the information. Unfortunately, in 20 cases the exact information on the account location was missing completely and so the code was applied by making assumptions based on the context of the tweet.

Making sense of the political themes of memes was possible by also approaching them deductively. Among them, it was possible to find Criticism of the Government and its government's supporters, Criticism of the socialism/communism system, Criticism of the state of the economy and the health system, References to the crisis/protests, Support for others' criticism and to victims.

The tone was coded as serious, neutral, and humorous. Serious memes should reference emotions like sadness, anger, sorrow, grief, and disappointment. Humorous memes should contain satire, irony, and sarcasm and sometimes expressions of dark humor or simply funny stories. Neutral memes were coded as content units that are between serious and humorous with a sense of ambiguity. It is expected a change of tone from more humorous to more serious while the protests developed given the characteristics and the nature of the political event. I stick to an understanding of a meme that is not necessarily 'funny.'

Finally, a code for the Type of meme was included. As stated in the theory section, memes can be either a nucleus or a satellite since they travel the Twittersphere being appropriated, sometimes remixed, and modified. On many occasions, the same meme was approached by different people in diverse ways.

The classification of memes was based either on the existing literature or the author's assumptions. While elements like the format and the tone were heavily influenced by what has been researched before, other elements like the thematic frames and forms of dissent, aiming at inferring the users' motivation, were drawn after the patterns that stood out from the data. Each meme received all the first levels of coding and then at least one or two more levels depending on their characteristics.

The coding process was mainly undertaken with NVivo, the leading software for qualitative research, and the help of Excel spreadsheets to contrast some of the findings. In total, eight codes were applied, each of them with up to three levels of coding. For many of the applied codes, it was necessary to divide the time frame into two parts: before

and after the protests, which revealed interesting insights into how meme production evolved after the outburst of the protests.

3. Findings

This chapter presents the main findings of the thesis. A quantitative and qualitative content analysis was conducted on the 111 memes posted from the 8th of July to the 15th of July 2021 about the protests in Cuba, the so-called 11J. This thesis aims to look at the nuances in discourses that memes convey concerning the political expressions of dissent. By pointing at the nature of the messages, it was possible to establish patterns of behavior by the users as well as to gain a better understanding of how such major political events impact the flow of political discussion in the online sphere, mainly in a particular context like Cuban's, whose authoritarian regime plays a determinant role in shaping the way dissent is addressed. The analysis permitted one to understand how external factors like the Internet Shutdown and the worldwide repercussions of the protests were determinants for the evolution of the political expression of dissent in times of political crisis in Cuba.

In the first part of the chapter, I explore the information regarding the nature of the messages contained within the memes in terms of the primary forms of dissent and the political themes. Furthermore, it explores the tone and the main actors behind those memes, which reveals insights into the nature of the behavior at the time of producing and posting memes. This was done to answer the first research question on how netizens used memes to express their political dissent regarding the protests.

The second part of the chapter answers the second research question, aimed at seeing what kind of memes prevailed and where they came from. To do so, I explored the nature of their content in terms of format, engagement, where they originated from, and what type of memes prevailed according to the grounded theory.

3.1 RQ1: How did Cuban netizens use Twitter memes to express political dissent during the protests that took place on the 11th of July 2021?

3.1.1 The nature of dissent

During the observed period, 54 (49%) of the memes contained some political opinion. By political opinion, I mean some generic comment, rate, or argument concerning the political event that was usually negative. If positive, it was toward an event or person intrinsically opposed to the people holding power or the dominant narrative. These opinions were approached differently depending on the topic and the situation. Among Cubans, those opinions mainly addressed the crisis by opening debates about how

authorities or other people were handling things. For example, meme 019 of the database, posted on the 9th of July, was a video of a young Cuban boy rapping on how authorities would better face the sanitary situation. This way, they ensured some subtlety rather than an explicit condemnation, although this also depended on whether the author was anonymous.

Among internationals, the form of dissent tended to be more explicit. Triggered by the deep discussions that the protests brought up on the duality of communism-capitalism, most of those opinions were negative ways to approach the system. The meme 065, posted on the 13th of July, shows a contrasting situation of a leftist blaming the embargo for the crisis while a Cuban is asking for freedom.

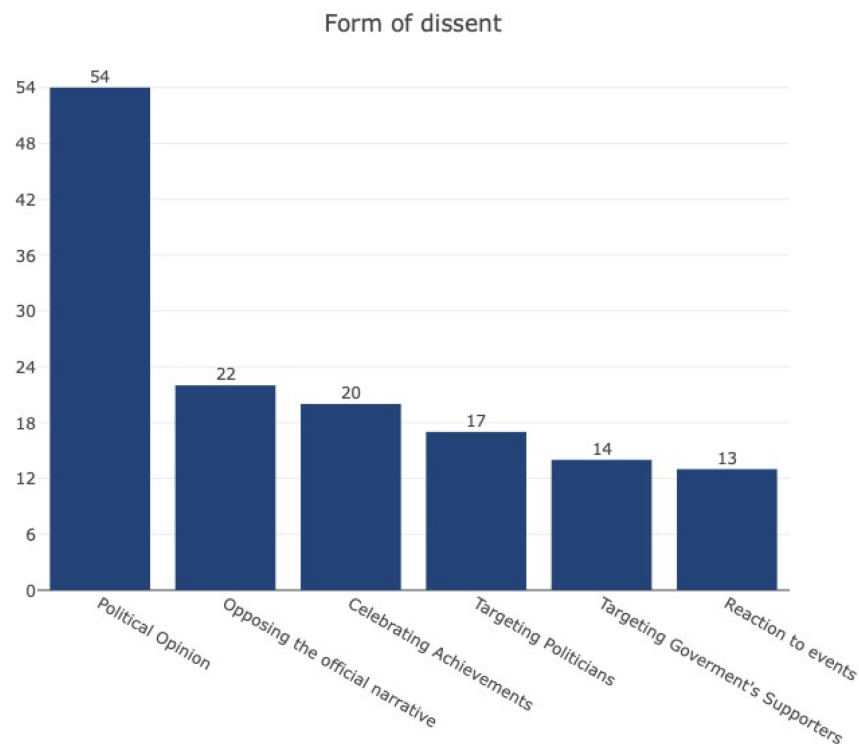


Figure 1. Bar chart with the frequency of the used forms of dissent (Twitter, own proceedings)

Many memes usually carried more than one form of dissent. Even the most straightforward piece of text was not just giving an opinion but also included some more specific ways to approach topics, which offered nuances in how they approached the crisis narrative. After political opinion, opposing the official narrative was the most common way for a meme to convey a dissenting message, coded in 22 (20%) units.

The reference to the opposition had to be explicit to be coded as such. I understand that the mere act of dissenting is some opposition to the official narrative, but not all explicitly expressed it. For example, opposition to the official narrative was shaped by embracing the phrase *Patria y Vida* (Homeland and Life), which alters the famous Cuban motto *Patria o Muerte* (Homeland or Death) coined by Fidel Castro. There are many examples of that: turning the phrase into a hashtag or sharing pieces of the song that inspired it. The meme 002 shows a picture of the phrase written on a wall with an ironic comment: “I love this revolutionary song.” The word revolutionary alludes to how supporters of the Cuban Government labeled themselves: “revolutionaries.” Other examples showed sarcastic comments about the effects of the embargo on Cuba, as shown in meme 007:



Figure 2. Meme posted on the 9th of July by Cuban activist Jorge Castro. The caption says: “Terrible effects of the yankee-imperialist blockade in the hotels of Varadero”.

Other forms of dissent were used to celebrate achievements in the context of the crisis. The #TwitterCuba community saw in the virilization of the #SOSCuba hashtag⁸

⁸ The viralization of the hashtag #SOSCuba is subject to scrutiny. It was observed during the manual analysis of the tweets that many people questioned the veracity of this achievement as a civil society initiative and, instead, pointed out the fact that a political campaign behind it, with the use of bots and automatized posting and retweeting, was involved. I stick to the point that it was still a successful

and the involvement of many international figures/celebrities in the discussions a successful citizen-made initiative. Before the protests, many memes played around tweets posted by artists and famous people that young generations feel connected to, for example, women's rights activist and former porn actress Mia Khalifa. References to the hashtag itself going viral showed the pride of the Cubans. As a symbol of the regime's weakness, the protests themselves were highly celebrated by Twitter users regardless of their geography.

Another way to express dissent was to target politicians. Among Cubans, President Miguel Díaz-Canel was usually portrayed in ridiculous ways. As head of the Cuban Government, Diaz-Canel was targeted as a puppet of the Castro family, as a murderer, as a thief and as a wealthy liar who should be held accountable for his actions. Overall, Diaz-Canel's speech (Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, 2021) calling for a confrontation between Cuban "revolutionaries" and "counterrevolutionaries", raised strong criticism among the opposition. On top of that, the reports of violence toward peaceful protestors made him look like the main responsible for the crisis.

But Díaz-Canel was not only the target. Socialist leaders in the Ibero-American region such as Spanish president Pedro Sánchez, former Bolivian president Evo Morales, former Argentina's president Cristina Fernández and the current one, her brother Alberto Fernández were also criticized because of their historical ties to the Cuban government. Historical politicians like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara also made their presence in the memes. Mocking politicians is a common way to express opposition to their policymaking. (Denisova, 2019)

Memes were also created to target the Government's supporters. As stated in the literature review, one of the main characteristics of memes as political messages is their capacity to help build communities (Fuchs, 2014), and those communities are created around the notions of we and them (Mortensen and Neumayer, 2021). Most of the memes were an explicit derision to those who usually argue that the Cuban system is some sort of paradise. Many memes were created around the same concept to confront these people. The concept was basically to post an image of a paradisiac, utopian, and quasi-futuristic city with a sarcastic comment saying things like: "This is Cuba according to the leftists". Meme 067 went further and put one of those images next to a picture of a poor

movement to raise international awareness on the situation in Cuba, but such an approach is still to be confirmed by the academia.

neighborhood in Cuba, with a caption saying: “Cuba for the progressive left-wing/ Cuba for the normal people” (Meme 067).

Finally, another form of dissent was a reaction to specific events, consistent with the current literature (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021). Before the protests, those events could be the hashtag #SOSCuba going viral or the involvement of celebrities in the discussion about the COVID-19 crisis. After the protests, many memes explicitly referred to it by encouraging those on the streets, giving an opinion on the violence, or simply expressing some sentiment, which corroborates the current state of research on how Twitter allows protestors to organize (Oltmann, Cooper, & Proferes, 2020). Here, for example, we can find the famous tik-toker Khaby posting an image pointing at one of the symbols of the protests to show support (making the gesture of his hands which he is known for). This meme was highly replicated and engaged (e.g., Meme 101). McLoughlin and Southern (2021) argue that in many salient events, memes have served as a reaction to the news and other kinds of information, and this is how some of the 11J-related memes worked. In sum, these memes served as a way for the netizens to react to the protests.

3.1.2 Political themes

This was a code closely related to the form of dissent. However, the intention of both is different. While the form of dissent aims at drawing inferences on the motivation behind the meme, political themes intend to classify the thematic frames in which memes can be encapsulated, and they are not necessarily correlated. That is why, for instance, we can find two very similar subcodes: “Targeting the Government’s supporters” and “Criticism to the Government Supporters.” There were cases where the salient pattern was not the same. First, it can be seen that the former is more related to the action at the time of posting, while the latter is more of the abstract idea contained in the meme. That is why, for instance, meme 072, which was a sarcastic comment against Argentinian president Alberto Fernández for not taking an explicit position on the Cuban protests, was coded with the political theme “Criticism to the Government’s supporters” and the form

of dissent “Targeting politicians,” instead. Figure 3 shows a comparison of the codes by the number of memes coded.

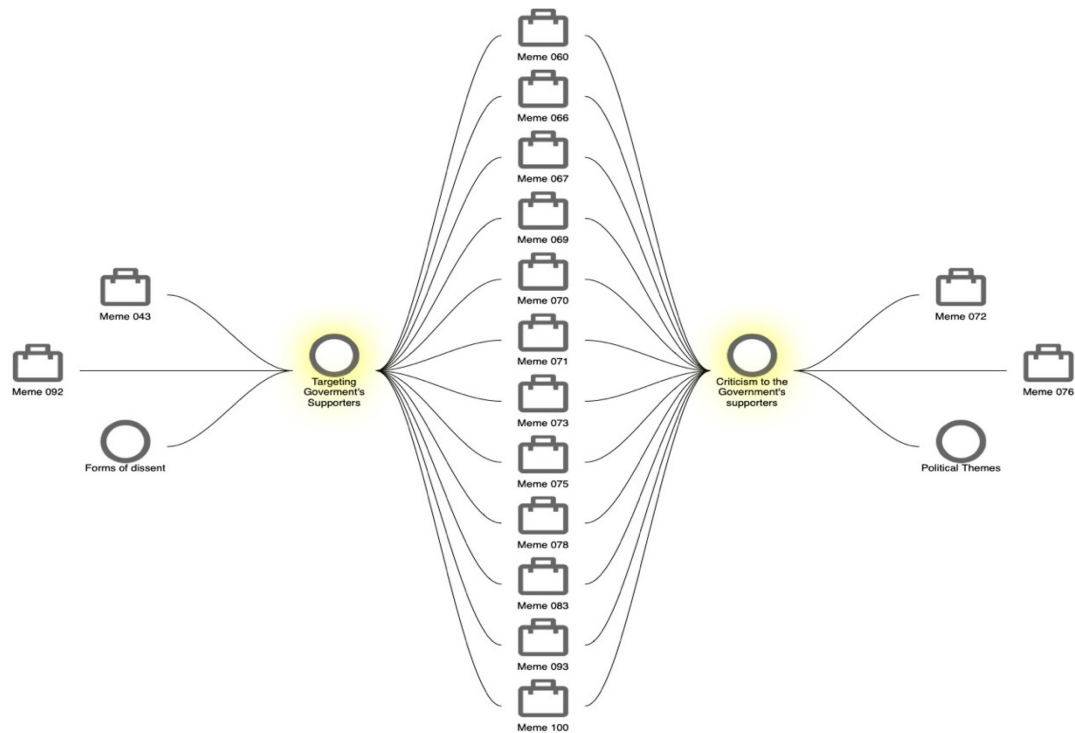


Figure 3: The diagram demonstrating a comparison between the codes “Targeting the Government’s supporter” and “Criticism to the Government’s supporters” in terms of the number of memes linked to each of them. (Twitter, own proceedings)

Most of the memes were mere references to the crisis or the protests in one way or another. This does not mean that they could not be framed within just one thematic frame. Many of these references to the protests or the economic and sanitary situation were accompanied by criticism. Twitter users used memes to refer to the crisis while criticizing socialism or communism as a political system. Cuba, as a reference for the international left-wing, failed to meet the expectation of many during these protests, and the opposition took advantage of it. Heated discussions raised in the international arena around this, and so memes served as a form to criticize the malfunction of the socialist system and its communist ideology.

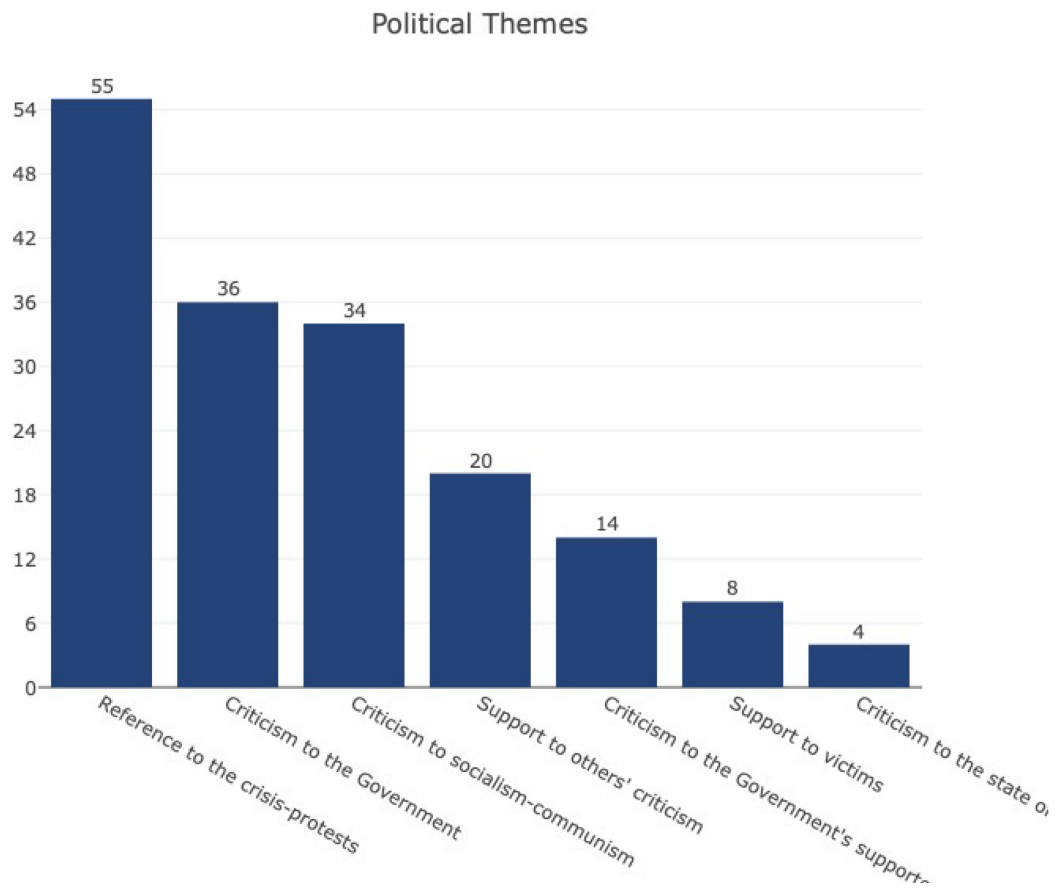


Figure 4: The bar chart showing the frequency of political themes in the memes. (Twitter, own proceedings)

Criticism of the Government was also a recurrent theme found in the memes. It was done to express dissent by targeting a politician or opposing the official narrative. When criticizing the Government, netizens referred to the protests or the COVID-19 crisis and to the history of mismanagement of the economy and the nature of the system. As stated above, the myth of the embargo was a usual reference.

Some other memes were labeled as such criticism when referring to the Government as a dictatorship. Let us take a few examples. Meme 032 is a cartoon showing a Cuban woman throwing Raul Castro away from the Island. Meme 038 is a death sentence to the Government. The meme, which is a simple piece of text, states: “Ayer murió la Dictadura Castrista 01-01-1959 --- 11-07-2021 Ahora solo falta enterrarla!! (Yesterday Castro’s dictatorship died 01-01-1959 --- 11-07-2021 Now what is left is burying it)” (Meme 038).

Support for others' criticism was another thematic frame found in the memes. Particularly before the protests, many Cuban netizens celebrated specific cases of criticism that were salient compared to others. Posting an allusion to another tweet, making a satellite meme out of a previous meme, and shouting out an ordinary person or a celebrity were common ways to embrace it. This can be interpreted as a form of self-regulation. It is not the same to celebrate other people's criticism as to do it ourselves, and many people can see it as less of a sin.

However, not all of them were subtle references. A significant form of supporting others' criticism was supporting the people protesting on the streets. The best example of this is a phrase that went viral. Meme 082, posted by the famous activist Yoani Sánchez, was a nucleus meme made from a phrase that says: "Teníamos tanta hambre que nos comimos el miedo (We were so hungry that we ate the fear)" (Meme 082). This phrase was highly replicated to encourage demonstrators to continue to the streets and celebrate what they had achieved so far.

Related to support for others' criticism was the support for victims. As a deep sanitary and political crisis, the 11J was difficult for many. First, the high number of deaths caused by a severe Delta strain outbreak and the authorities' reported violence against peaceful demonstrators. Many memes were just forms to show compassion and encouragement as well as shared grief due to the seriousness of the situation.

Finally, another political frame found in four of the memes was the criticism of the state of the health system. This pursues the goal of destroying one of the biggest myths of Cuban political propaganda: the country holds a leading universal health care system. Two memes were replicas of the same unit of content: a video of an ill person being taken to the hospital in a rustic carriage pushed by horses. The videos were accompanied by a sarcastic caption (see memes 095 and 097).

3.1.3 Meme creators

Interestingly, 66 (60 %) of the memes were produced by ordinary citizens, consistent with many previous studies (e.g., McLoughlin, L., & Southern, 2021). I was expecting a majority to be created by elites. In the study I conducted in 2022 in which I compared meme production in Cuba and Zambia (Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022), I stated that most of the memes were elite made. However, the concept of elites had been approached differently this time. Previously, I included meme-makers as some sort of online elite, mainly because of their high influence on social media. For this thesis, I

preferred to stick to the concept of traditional social elites, which are actors of society that are influential beyond the boundaries of social media. They enjoy an offline high social status and in the Internet environment where they work as opinion leaders. Most of the influencers/meme makers, on the other hand, turned out to be ordinary citizens with a solid dedication to creating content on Twitter. However, they did not necessarily enjoy high social status.

Likewise, the number of elite-made memes was considerably large. When breaking down the code into its respective subcodes, it can be seen that ordinary citizens, whether the so-called meme-creators or influencers or just ordinary users, have to compete with a force of celebrities, politicians, organizations, opinion leaders and activists whose number of followers usually outnumber the rest of the people and make their content highly likely to go viral and be memeified. Indeed, when comparing the elite code with the different levels of engagement, most of the medium and high-engagement memes belonged to elites. Only one elite-made meme had a low engagement. In contrast, most low-engaged memes were produced by ordinary citizens.

3.1.4 Memes are mainly humorous, but not always

Overall, humorous memes constituted the vast majority of the sample, 78 (70%). Consistent with the popular perception of a meme, many were a form of playful activity when expressing political thoughts on Twitter. As stated by Milner (2013), memes are highly contextual. So, one characteristic of humorous memes was the self-referential language that made them nonsensical to some outsiders, thus cultivating a community-based experience essential in social media dynamics. One example is meme 046, a text that says: “Tirano no, broader, te dijeron singao (not a tyrant, brother, they called you ‘singao’)” to refer to President Diaz Canel, without mentioning him. Here, the word singao (a Cuban word that can be translated as ‘motherf*cker’) is a reference to the president that dissidents usually use.

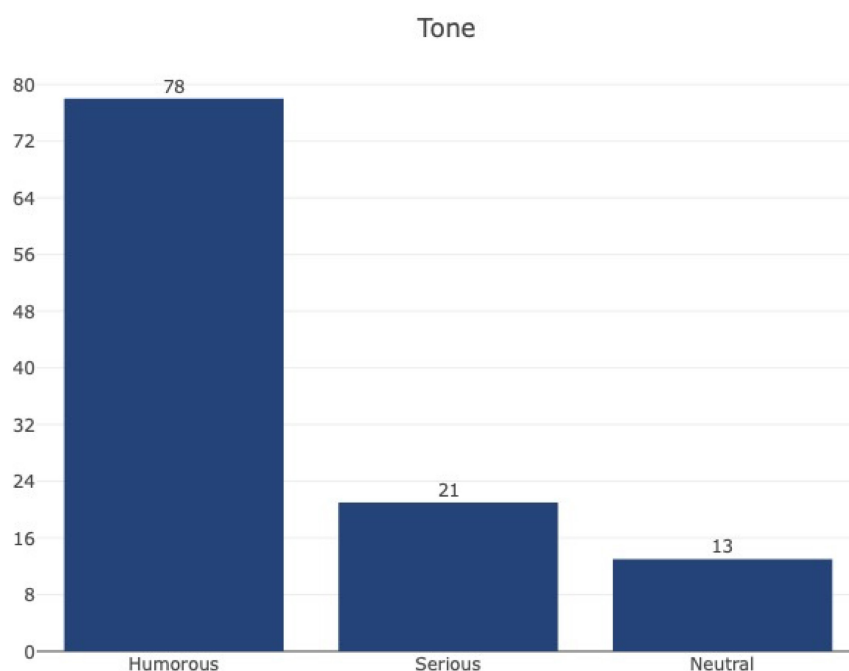


Figure 5. The bar chart demonstrating the frequency of tones used in the memes. (Twitter, own proceedings)

This is why many studies frame memes as a new genre of political humor (Denisova, 2019), which trigger emotional reactions that then trigger interactivity, whether with liking or retweeting (Sikananu & León Carpio, 2022). Many of the 11J memes were reformulations of well-known forms of political humor like cartoons, which took a new dimension of impact on public opinion thanks to the affordances of Twitter. Other memes could be recognized more like the prototype we usually know, like those that re-configure icons and units of culture to reinterpret themes and situations, such as a scene of a movie, the face of a celebrity, or a viral character to then turn them into a template and put them in service of infinite ideas.

Sarcasm was the most common way to approach humor (53 memes) regardless of the format, theme, dissent purpose, origin, or creator. Sarcastic comments, whether in text or images, videos or gifs, tended to be very successful. More in line with traditional expressions of humor, parody (12 memes) and irony (10 memes) were used to construct the messages of the memes. As an example of parody, Meme 053 is a video of a person wearing a Fidel Castro costume to mock the historical leader of the Cuban Revolution. Meme 078 shows a screenshot of another user, a supporter of the Cuban Government,

being contested by another user, with a caption that said ironically: “Look, mom, I’m trending topic, we won.”

Usually, a common way to approach memes is using black humor, but this type of humor was found only in two memes. One portrayed President Díaz-Canel with bloody hands, telling his wife he did not know how to remove the blood, and the other one showed top communist leaders on their deathbeds with a caption saying: “Who said communist don’t have nice pictures?” (See meme 068 and meme 088). On another note, five memes were labeled as a funny story, basically a narration of a humorous situation related to the protests.

Serious memes also made their presence 21 (19%). They helped netizens express their anger, disappointment, grief, and hope concerning the crisis in Cuba. They were used to call for action, in some cases, or to react negatively to some of the tensest situations happening. Neutral memes, which could not be labeled as humorous or serious, were only 13 (12%). The amount of serious and neutral memes confirms the need to keep raising discussion on the definition of the meme in the context of political communication and the new genres that emerged from the Internet and social media. Perhaps restricting their scope of memes to only an expression of political humor is somewhat reductionist.



Figure 6. Humorous memes. (Left) A parody of a scene from the animated movie *Megamind*, reformulated to celebrate the viralization of the hashtag #SOSCuba. text says: “I did it?/ You did it”. (Right), a famous template used to celebrate Mia Khalifa’s support to the cause.

“Nunca vamos a usar la fuerza y el día que el pueblo no me quiera me iré”
Fidel Castro
La Habana 9 de Enero de 1959.



Figure 7. Neutral memes. (Left) a picture of Fidel Castro and a famous quotation of his saying “We never going to use the force against the people, the day the people do not want me, I will leave”. (Right) Che Guevara's picture on a trash container. Caption says: “Beautiful”.

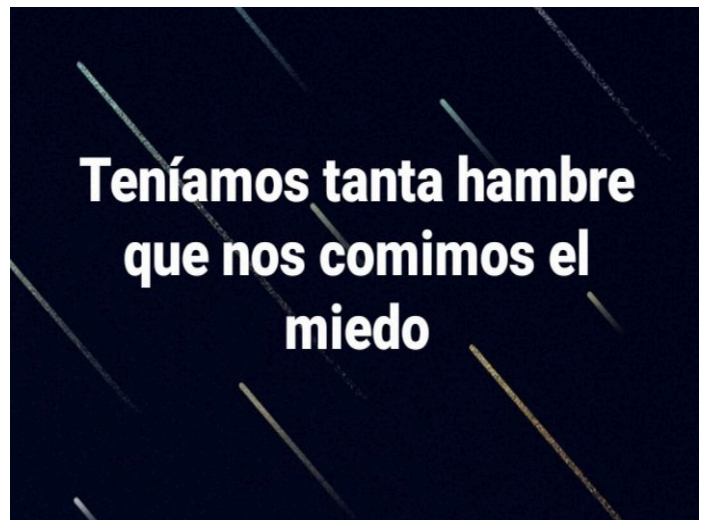


Figure 8. Serious memes. (Left) Painting of famous José Martí, father of the Cuban nation; his eyes were modified to make him look crying as a way to show grief. (Right) Viral phrase saying “We were so hungry that we ate the fear”.

3.2 RQ2: What kind of memes prevailed when engaging in political discussions related to the 11J Protests in Cuba and where did those memes come from?

3.2.1 Levels of engagement

Engagement is an essential piece of information to understand the kind of content that draws users' attention online. As has been stated above, memes are more likely to succeed if they are widely shared and if they become viral. Engagement then works as a predictor of where the state of opinion is moving, so it was included as a point of departure for this research to answer one of the research questions. Of course, much has been said and researched about how the flow of information and the rise of discussion is determined by the gatekeeping process in platforms like Twitter, where automatized algorithms play a significant role in the dissemination of information, and how they have been shaping the perception of the public opinion online. However, as Lukács (2021, p. 72) points out: "corporate social media are not designed in ways such that they could easily be harnessed to expand social movements." Units of content such as memes can travel alone and contribute to information diffusion, spread awareness of particular issues, and raise debates in times of crisis. In sum, social media – through memes, in this case – "can help organize political activism" (Lukács, 2021, p. 73).

As such, the results of the analysis showed interesting patterns. Overall, 59 (53%) of the memes received between 300 and 1000 likes and a similar number of comments and retweets. They were considered to have medium engagement during the observation period. High engagement, above 1000 likes per meme, was present in 33 (30%) memes, whereas low engagement in only 20, 18% of the analyzed sample.

As stated above, Cuban Twitter communities are relatively small, and that is why the patterns in the data showed how low engagement tended to tilt the balance in favor of the tweets produced in Cuba by ordinary citizens. Furthermore, how memes were engaged varied considerably before and after the protests. The three days before the protests were characterized by memes that usually had a low engagement. 95% of the low-engaged memes belonged to this period. Generally, a meme performing well before the protests ranged around 300 likes, which could position it between low and medium engagement. It is worth noting that, even though the protests had not taken place yet, the country was already experiencing the sanitary crisis produced by a severe wave of COVID-19 that led to the outburst of the protests.

In contrast, most of the memes posted once the protests took off received mostly high and medium engagement. The low engagement was found only in one meme. The reason seems to be that the international repercussions of the protests drew attention to what was happening in Cuba and caused deep debates worldwide. In this context, Twitter communities in Cuba were left behind, and international actors with tremendous influence took the attention of the content. While Cuban Twitter users must have produced many memes other than those analyzed in this thesis during the period, their engagement must have lowered considerably to prevent them from reaching wider audiences, so they were left out of consideration.

Furthermore, the Internet shutdown prevented many meme-creators in Cuba from producing memes. It was observed that many of the recurrent profiles that tweeted content before the protests were missing, and on the occasions that they could tweet something, they were more focused on complaining about how poor access to the internet was affecting their content production; they were worrying about how far the situation would go or simply fighting for the liberation of one of the members of the community, a beloved meme-maker named Ariel Falcón, who was imprisoned after going out on the streets to protest. The hashtag #FreeAriel was also popular.

On the other hand, other profiles monopolized the users' attention in the international arena. The number of public figures that joined the debate was inherently influential and obscured the range of citizen-made content. The Cuban crisis brought back to life a good-old discussion: the duality between communism versus capitalism and its profound repercussions in Latin American history.

3.2.2 How memes were shaped

When understanding an Internet meme, it is common to refer to its format, the type of content a meme is made out of. Nowadays, with so many social media platforms that exploit various formats, the way a meme is developed has been widened in diverse ways. With Tik Tok occupying the seventh spot in the rank of most-used social networks by monthly users (Dixon, 2023), video memes are slowly becoming a trending genre (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). However, as a witness of the first emergence of social media, Twitter memes, at least in Cuba, were shaped traditionally, so 100 (90 %) out of the total memes were labeled as statics.

Overall, images and texts were the most common static format found, and although text memes were used many times, images, whether with captions or not,

prevailed as the most common format. 58 (58%) of the static memes contained images. Non-static memes were used little compared to the others, and if so, videos were the most used format since only two of the memes contained gifs.

The use of images and text to create memes is an interesting pattern due to the nature of the Internet in Cuba. First and foremost, connecting in Cuba remains a challenge. Even in regular times, it has been reported how a state-owned company, Etecsa, the only one offering telecommunications services in Cuba, acts as a monopoly and restricts the connection time by making it expensive and slow. This is one of the reasons why the Government could order a complete shutdown when the demonstrations started, leaving the people with no choice but to waiting while being disconnected. This has become a common practice in the country when political confrontations occur (Ortutay, Bajak, & Arbel, 2021). That said, it is not a coincidence that many of the memes produced by Cubans within the Island were mainly images and text. When running the analysis, it was observed that most of the memes that used videos or gifs as their basis of the content originated outside the country.

Images and text were then heavily used to create memes with political goals. The content could vary depending on the purposes of the meme and sometimes depending on the tone. A meme could use just random images that illustrate an event, a person, or a situation to express opinions, or just one tweet made of a piece of text that could be either a joke, a sarcastic comment, or even diverse genres like a poem, a phrase, a quotation that conveyed and simplified message with an inner meaning.

On some occasions, it was difficult to determine whether a tweet was an actual meme. This is because certain kinds of content can seem ambiguous. While there are prototypes of memes that are easily identifiable, as those made from predetermined templates that everybody knows –or at least run into occasionally, others are just becoming memes at the moment.

One characteristic of the memetic culture on the Internet is the use of memefied icons, which usually serve as a nucleus of appropriated, remixed memes that are usually funny. The popular belief is that memes are whatever Internet content makes us laugh when at certain times is just the opposite. One example observed in this study was meme 043, which shows a man hesitating to press a button, taken from a comic. It has been extensively used in an infinite range of topics and political stances, and here it was appropriated to express discontent about people supporting the Cuban Government.



Figure 9. A man representing leftist in Latin America when talking about the Cuban crisis. One button says: “Cuba is poor because of the commercial blockade” and the other: “Free market generates poverty”.

However, it was challenging to recognize in many other examples, mostly in serious memes. One question arises: Is a tweet also a meme due to the mere fact of being viral? The answer is: sometimes. However, it depends on how the tweet is shaped. In this study, not all tweets were memes, but all memes were tweets. As such, the format of memes is intrinsically connected to the platform they are born in.

On the one hand, there were just tweets (pieces of texts) born as memes because they usually were a cultural unit, as stated above, a poem, a quotation, a sarcastic comment that conveyed a simplified message everyone can appropriate. This way, tweets can generate a whole cultural experience by bringing people together around one thought and playing around a joke to target an opponent collectively. On the contrary, a tweet can generate a meme only if it collides with other elements or if people remix it. An ordinary tweet giving an opinion is not a meme. Nevertheless, a tweet and the most liked answer of another user making a good counterpoint can generate a whole experience of shared opinion. An example is meme 056, posted on the 12th of July, in which two elements are confronting. On one side, a tweet defending the Cuban Government and repeating a few

of its common justifications for the crisis. On the other, a comment using the same structure and wording to counter argue the tweet.



Figure 10. (Left) “Cuba has: Legal abortion. Universal healthcare. National celebration against transphobia and homophobia. Free education. Dignified workers’ rights. This is why conservative groups despise Cuba”. (Right) “In Cuba: we don’t have food. We don’t have freedom of speech. If you offend the regime, forget about your human rights. We have a repressive system which shoots citizens while I am writing. I LIVE IN THE MONSTER AND I KNOW ITS GUTS; DON’T SPEAK TRASH.”

3.2.3 Cuban memes not that Cuban

If something characterizes the political discussion in Cuba is a high polarization in which dissent has been historically shaped outside the country. The emergence of the Internet in Cuba, and the consequent access of Cubans to social media, brought closer the people within the Island to a more accessible space with all kinds of political interactions. One can argue that the 11J protests were the right opportunity for Cuban nationals to monopolize the crisis narrative. However, the patterns shown in this research suggest that the tendency was the opposite for many reasons. To start with, an impressive number of

memes were produced outside the country (76; 68 %). Only 36 out of the total sample (32 %) were recognized to be produced by Cubans living in the country at the moment of tweeting during the whole observation period. The Internet Shutdown that took place shortly after the beginning of the protests, and lasted for at least 48 hours, negatively affected meme production, thus leaving Cuban citizens, the most affected by the crisis, with no means to engage in online discussions. That is one of the main reasons why the meme production on the Island dropped significantly after the 11th of July. Whereas 25 memes were produced before the protests, only 11 were counted afterward.

After the protests, it was observed that most of the memes were posted overseas, many not even made by Cubans. The Internet shutdown and the protests' international transcendence and the crisis can explain this. The protests served as a point of departure to raise discussions on the effectiveness of socialism and communism as political and economic systems and detractors of such political ideologies took advantage of them. While Cubans tended to refer to the crisis itself, a plethora of actors in Latin America were raising their voices not only to condemn the violence of the Government but mainly to reflect on the failures of a system that the left wing elevates as an example of success in the region, and, if failed, the guilt usually is pointed at the effects of the American embargo over Cuba.

The meme's origin was a determinant factor of the outcome of many analyses since it affected elements such as the tone and even the format. As stated above, many non-static memes were produced outside the country. The following Graph shows how 11 out of 12 non-static memes, made from videos and gifs, were actually posted outside Cuba.

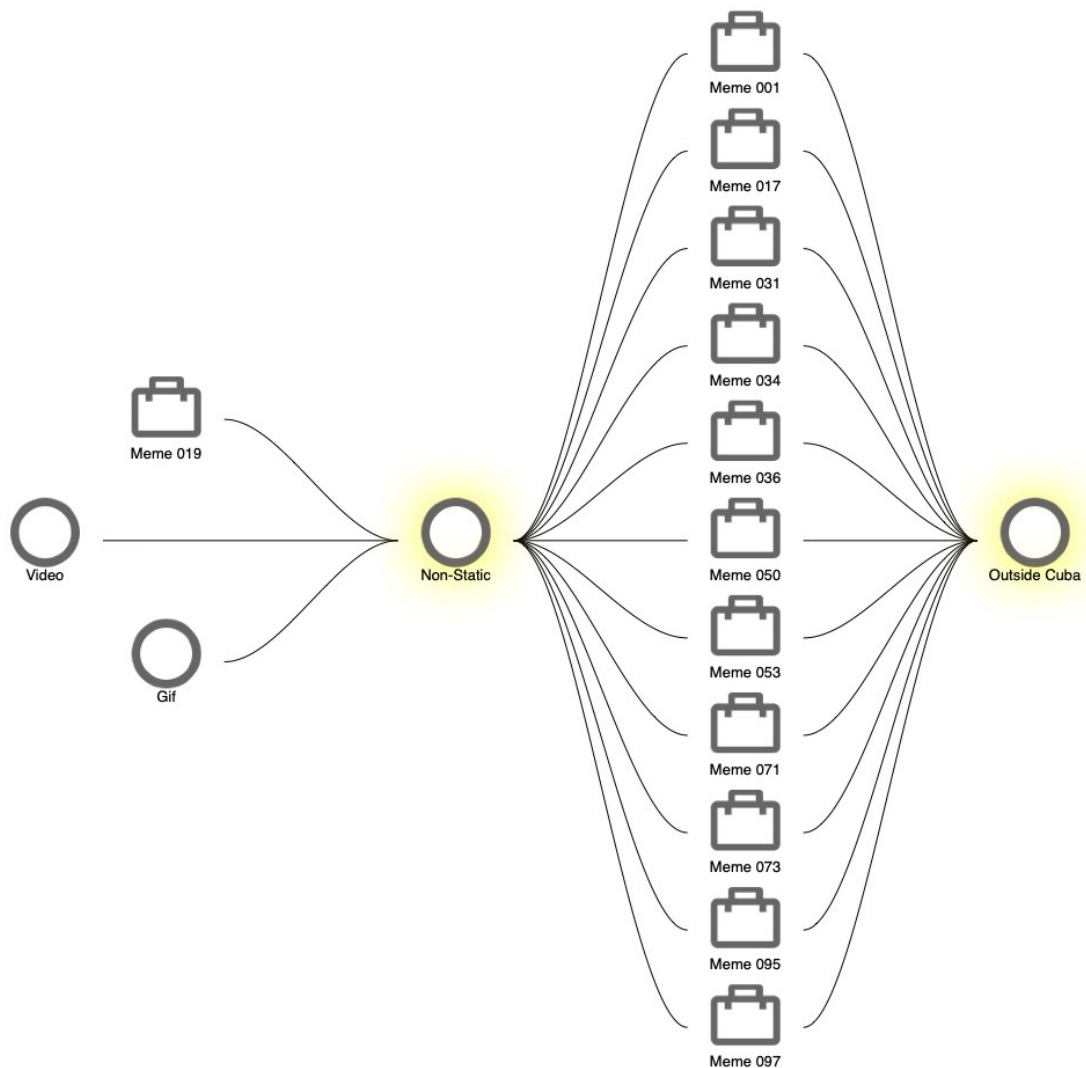


Figure 11. The diagram showing the memes that are coded by “Non-static” and “Outside Cuba”. Only one non-static meme was not coded as “Outside Cuba”. (Twitter, own proceedings)

Similarly, the meme’s origin affected the tones’ nature. While serious tones remained practically steady in both time frames, a sudden increase in humorous tones and memes produced outside Cuba can be seen. This assumption should be made cautiously, primarily due to the way the origin of the meme was determined, which is subject to inaccuracies. However, given the qualitative approach of this research, it is sufficient to conclude that there is an interesting pattern in how memes were created either by Cubans living on the Island or people living abroad. Logic plays in our favor. While Cubans,

silenced by the Government and busy taking care of the protests, could not tweet the memes how they would want to, people living abroad, not directly affected by the event, could feel less pressure to take it hilariously.

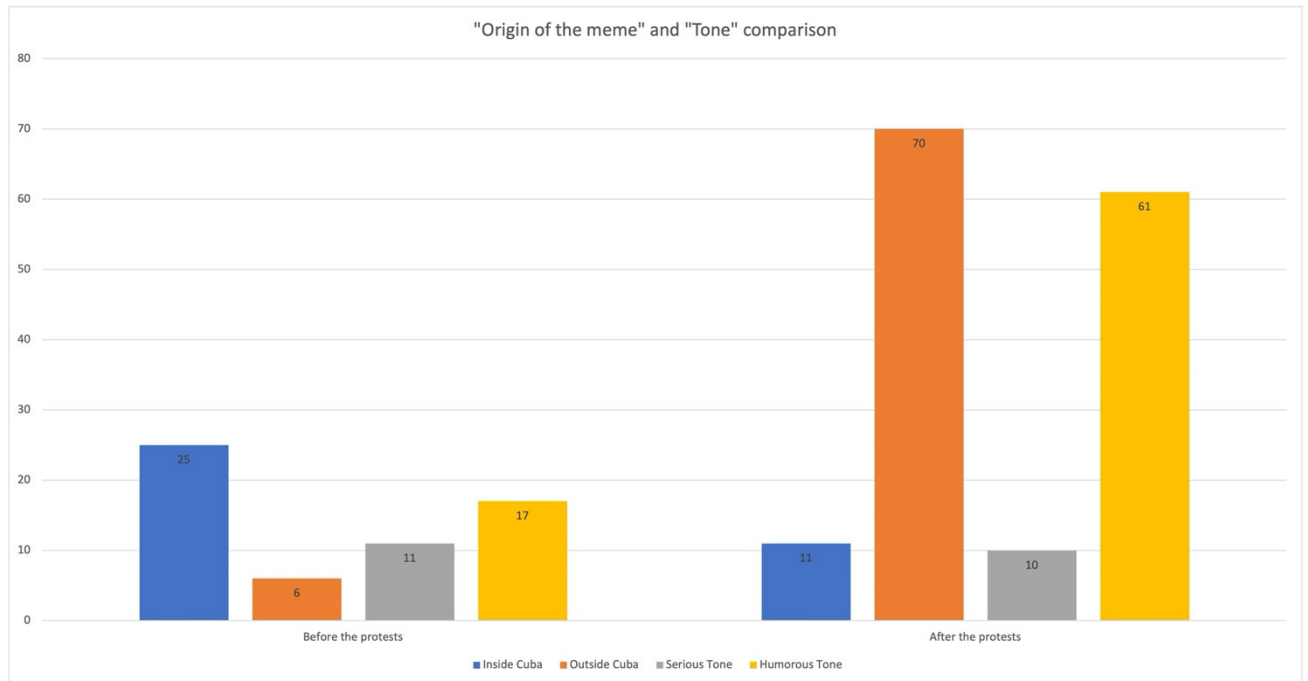


Figure 12. The graph placing together the number of memes coded with “Tone” and “Origin of the meme” in both time frames, before and after the protests. (Twitter, own proceedings)

3.2.4 Type of meme

Finally, I sought to understand how and why certain memes were created. All the memes started their life as a message that traveled the online space without restriction. Nevertheless, only a few of them had the power to be highly appropriated and remixed by other users. For that type of meme, the journey does not end after succeeding in a certain period. However, they keep growing by forming whole groups of satellite memes related to that nucleus that circulated on the internet.

While most of the memes were labeled as a nucleus, this is, as a meme that just started living in the context of the protests, other memes, mainly the ones with more engagement, was highly reproduced and served to expand the conversation around one topic. There were 40 satellite memes out of 111 (40 %), and most were a replication of that nucleus that people appropriate when sharing an opinion, a political stance, or a reaction to an event. They are good examples of why memes are helpful for building online communities and bringing people together around one political cause.

Satellite memes were either created after a famous template (because that template is generally a meme itself) or just a previous meme that expanded the discussions or even added new perspectives to that discussion. For example, the tweets of famous activist and former porn actress Mia Khalifa were highly memefied in the context of the sanitary crisis. Khalifa's tweets were considered memes, and her integration into the debate made people raise awareness of the success of the political campaign to draw international attention to the Cuban crisis. Another example is a meme that many international users highly replicated. The meme was created after a template that showed a man pushing a domino piece in a row of pieces. Each piece was labeled with the flag of the Latin American countries with a leftist regime, suggesting that the Cuban protest, and an alleged system collapse, would cause a domino effect in the region. This meme was highly engaged, shared by many activists and politicians who replicated it with a caption that usually added either a serious or sarcastic comment.



Figure 13. The domino-effect meme suggesting the fall of Cuba would lead to the fall of socialist systems in all Latin America. It was highly replicated by Twitter users.

3.3 Summary of results

The thesis sought to examine the nuances in discourses that memes conveyed concerning the political expressions of dissent during the protests in Cuba on the 11th of July 2021. Both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis was applied to 111 memes that were purposely selected in a time frame of around one week, from the 8th to the 15th of July 2021. Drawing from the theories of tactical media and participatory cultures, as well as the rhetorical structure theory of memes, it was possible to establish the primary forms of dissent used by netizens and the main political themes contained within the memes concerning the 11J protests. Furthermore, it was possible to make inferences about the main behaviors and stances of the memes' creators and the nature of their content in terms of engagement, format, tone, and origin.

The two research questions were answered:

RQ1: How did Cuban netizens use Twitter memes to express political dissent during the protests on the 11th of July 2021?

The analysis permitted one to arrive at the conclusion that most of the memes allowed netizens to express all kinds of opinions on the economic and political crisis, before and after the protests, as a form of dissent. Memes were also used to target the politicians and their main supporters, to react to some temporary events, to celebrate achievements concerning the protests as a community, and, overall, to oppose the official narrative dominated by the mainstream media and the Government propaganda.

In terms of the main themes, memes were a mere reference to the crisis, which validates their use to react to the protests and to engage politically in this regard. There was strong criticism of the Government and its allies but also support for other people's criticism as well as for victims. Criticizing the health system as a pillar of Government propaganda was another observable theme. All this was done through a humorous tone, mainly highlighting sarcasm as the most common strategy and irony, parody, funny stories, and dark humor in a few cases. Serious memes conveyed sentiments of grief, anger, disappointment, and hope. Neutral memes that could not be labeled as humorous or serious also made their presence.

RQ2: What kind of memes prevailed when engaging in political discussions related to the 11J Protests in Cuba, and where did those memes come from?

Memes received mainly medium engagement, from 300 to 1000 likes, depending on whether it was done inside or outside Cuba and before or after the protests. Those

memes posted outside Cuba tended to be the most engaged ones. After the protests, it was possible to see an increase in high engagement, with memes receiving more than 1000 likes. This was similar to those created by elites, which received more likes. However, most of the memes were produced by ordinary citizens, many of them being those meme-makers that are highly popular on Twitter. The vast majority of the memes were statics, with images dominating the trending format of Twitter memes. A small amount, mainly produced outside Cuba, were either video or gif memes. When it comes to the type of memes, I saw that most of them were nucleus, originally created for the cause, while the rest were some satellite memes around one topic or cause, which emerged from a previous nucleus meme.

Discussion

The findings of this thesis demonstrate the importance of social media in the development of political discussions in times of crisis for non-democracies societies. As has been stated before, memes add new layers of meaning to the way political messages are embraced by the people, particularly in countries where it is dangerous to go on to the streets to protest peacefully (Boulianne, 2019-2020). In countries under authoritarian regimes, the “lack of established social institutions and platforms of negotiation with the state make the Internet the only vibrant site of the public discussion” (Denisova, 2019, pp. 239 -240). During the demonstrations that took place in Cuba on the 11th of July 2021, memes served to convey primarily the opinions of the netizens about the political events while also taking from different resources to achieve their goals of raising political discussions and shaping the narrative of the crisis, which is, according to Lukács (2021), one of the main strengths of social media platforms. This is particularly important for the Cuban context, where the Government, through a set of laws and decrees, is trying to suffocate the attempts of ordinary citizens to express online dissent.

Memes’ reference to the protests and the sanitary crisis was a determinant step for political groups to visualize the current opposition’s agenda, as well as their central claims and ideological principles. As for the ordinary citizens, they helped convey their criticism against the authorities in a safe space. Most importantly, as a means of participatory media, they gave those citizens powerful tools for political expression given the lack of official spaces.

However, assuming that memes introduced significant changes in such political events is pretentious. Lukács (2021), studying memes as protest media in Hungary, found that such units of popular culture did not challenge the power of authority, nor did they lead to a social or institutional change. Analyzing the memes in Cuba permitted me to see how their contribution was made only on the surface of the big crisis. To start with, memes were only a small portion of the content published on the Twittersphere, and external factors determined the development of the protests. Even when explicitly calling for action, there is no evidence to suggest that memes made people go to protest, nor did they not pose a threat to the authorities in comparison with the ‘real world’ protests.

On the other hand, one can argue that memes functioned as a protest itself. Drawing from the theoretical assumptions that a message can be considered an act of

activism, I can say that it served to reflect the protests in a separate space, the digital one. First, they provided the people with other means of expression, thus adding new meanings to the protests and crisis narrative. This was particularly beneficial for the ex-pat community and other citizens worldwide who could form part of the confrontation, at least in the way the Internet allowed them. Furthermore, memes did help establish a more concrete anti-government narrative by offering a clear frame of what people think about the ruling class and the dynamics of power relations in Cuba, which is inherently taken cautiously in other scenarios.

Nevertheless, memes helped in the radicalization of the discourses around the political systems, highlighting, even more, the gaps between antagonist groups, thus contributing to a more polarized environment: those who support the Government and those who do not; those belonging to the left wing and those belonging to the center-right wing. As in Russia, Twitter users tended to “express their opinions in political debates with the help of Internet memes rather than verbal arguments” (Shomova, 2022, p. 238).

Once again, humor was the main move of memetic content thanks to the affordances of sarcasm, irony, or parody in political discourses. Historically, humor is a good ally of political expression and has monopolized how memes are approached. As being first and foremost playful, popular belief regards memes as “funny” Internet artifacts with a set of predetermined features. Nevertheless, the definition is still subject to revisions as it was challenging to label a tweet as a meme because they do not usually come with a predetermined form. As I stated above, the meme’s content is determined by the platform where it is embedded. When considering some tweets as memes, I took their mimetic capacity – replication, appropriation, and simplified message that made them easily go viral. Sometimes a sarcastic comment was more successful than another piece of content that was thought out to be a meme because it was more in line with what an actual meme proposes: the fact that they “resonate from the use in context, they absorb and tire concepts and trends” (Denisova, 2019, p. 30). Having said that, serious and neutral memes were as successful as their humorous counterparts in terms of engagement and shareability. Even more interesting, in the case of memes produced inside Cuba, it seemed on many occasions that a serious meme was even more appropriate given the circumstances. This invites us to keep raising discussion on the meme definition in the context of Internet communication in contrast with popular belief.

Perhaps the most striking finding of this thesis is that the protagonists of memetic exchange during the protests mainly reside outside Cuba. Even though it is observable

that the use of memes in everyday life of Cubans led to the thinking that an explosion of memes would occur during the protests, the present thesis shows how the equilibrium of everyday communication in the online environment, through memes, is subject to be easily disrupted by external factors. The fact that the Internet shutdown left Cubans with no means to express themselves demonstrates the need to advocate for more democratic Internet access, thus giving citizens with more control over the flow of information within the Island. In this case, it could be seen how Cubans nationals ended up being left behind concerning meme production.

The magnitude of the protests, on the other hand, was a double-edged sword. While it helped raise worldwide discussion on the topic, it disadvantaged ordinary Cuban citizens. The success of a meme heavily depended on the profile of the meme creator – the more influential it was, the more chances the meme had to go viral. Regarding the Cuban protests, most memes were produced by ordinary citizens, but elites produced the most engaged memes. Denisova (2019) called Russian meme-makers “the new journalists, civil activists and political protesters” (p.161), thus highlighting the importance of a meme depending on the person who posts it. In fact, many of the elites who tweeted memes about the protests in Cuba were either activists, politicians, or opinion leaders such as journalists, artists, and celebrities who understood their power—Together with a political opinion, memes intrinsically carried basic information that served to spread the news about something, as well as crucial elements of the ideological assumption of its creators thus making the message subject to different interpretations.

It is worth noting again the need to take cautiously the assumptions of those residing out of the country. This is acknowledged to be one of the limitations of this study. Even though it was possible to cross-check the information with several sources –from the IP location to the information in the profile of the user – a few of them were assumed only by inferring the information after the context of the tweet. However, despite the possible inaccuracies, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that most of the memes were produced outside Cuba, mainly after the protests took off.

Another limitation is that this thesis only looks at the nature of the messages and leaves behind the opinion of Twitter users and meme-makers. The motivation behind posting a meme is instead missing or subject to change if semi-structured interviews were included in the research design, something that was left out of consideration due to time and feasibility constraints. Furthermore, mere content analysis is insufficient to take the

whole picture of the memetic culture regarding the 11J protests, so further research is suggested.

As a recommendation for future research, I suggest amplifying the time frame and the engagement criteria to reach a larger sample. Conducting a discourse and semiotic analysis would lead to a better insight into the discursive choices of meme creators. Finally, a comparison of both pro-government memes and dissent memes would contribute to a better understanding of the nature of political discussions in Cuba when it comes to memes.

Conclusion

Memes were an outstanding tool for the political expression of dissent in Cuba during the 11J protests in 2021. Through the application of content analysis to the 111 memes in the referred time frame, it was possible to recognize the many forms in which dissent was shaped during such a political event. It was particularly interesting to observe how the nature of dissent changed before and after the protests. In fact, the outburst of the demonstrations meant a twisting point in how some messages were approached, so the nature of the memes changed drastically. Likewise, the analysis allowed me to corroborate some of the main features that characterize memes for political expression: their capacity to convey the simplified opinions of internet users, their power as community builders, and their success as playful content emerged from the Internet language.

Memes allowed people to express their discontent against politicians and their violence and incapacity to handle a sanitary crisis, to support peers and victims, to celebrate achievements, and so on, with a tone that tended to be humorous, as it is intrinsically linked to memes production according to the current literature. The Cuban protests reverberated internationally and brought people from abroad to the discussion, which, together with the Internet shutdown on Cuban soil, negatively affected the meme production for Cuban netizens and influenced the outcome of memes in terms of origin, tone, and engagement. As a whole, memes received from 300 to 1000 likes. They were primarily static images or text, but this depended on whether the memes were created by elites or ordinary citizens, by people inside or outside Cuba.

Overall, this thesis contributes to mapping how dissent is carried out in Cuba and how memes help shape how it is being interpreted on online social platforms. The present research also adds a new layer of how the 11J protests, as an understudied event, rebounded as a political incident of major importance not only for Cuba but to the world and how online tools contributed to shaping its narratives and discourse approaches. Furthermore, this thesis helps understand the nature of meme creation as a form of the political expression of dissent, or what is better, the political nature of memes in service of the different actors of the political game, such as the dissidents and the civil society.

I sought to contribute to the current expression of political dissent in a country where the right to protest peacefully has been suppressed while one of the deepest political crises in the history of its communist regime was taking place. The fact that such an approach has the risk of being blocked or silenced within Cuban universities brings up

more relevance to this project. This thesis's results contribute to how current political communication is taking shape. I believe this research offers an understanding of online political discourse in non-democratic societies while also providing insight into political participation in countries whose spaces for media and individual freedom are shrinking. As Shomova (2022) points out: "the use of memes becomes a technology of political public relations, going far beyond everyday entertaining Internet communication" (p. 235).

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List of appendices

Appendix 1: Codebook

Appendix 2: Memes Database

Appendices

Appendix 1: Code book

Code	Description (if necessary)
1. Engagement	The amount of likes in every meme
a. High	More than 1000
b. Medium	From 300 to 1000
c. Low	Less than 300
2. Format	The main characteristic of the content of the meme
a. Non-Static	
i. Gif	
ii. Video	
b. Static	
i. Image	
ii. Text	
3. Forms of dissent	The way a meme is approached in order to express a political message of dissent
a. Celebrating Achievements	
b. Political opinion	
c. reaction to events	
d. Self-references	

e. Targeting Government's supporters	
f. Targeting Politicians	
4. Meme creators	Social status of the person creating the meme
a. Elites	
i. Activists	
ii. Celebrities	
iii. Opinion Leaders	
iv. Organizations-media outlets	
v. Politicians	
b. Ordinary Citizens	
i. Meme-makers (influencers)	Ordinary citizens with over 11k followers.
ii. Ordinary users	Ordinary citizens with up to 11k followers.
5. Origin of the meme	Based on IP location, Profile description and context of the meme.
a. Inside Cuba	
b. Outside Cuba	
6. Political themes	Thematic patterns found in memes
a. Criticism to Government's supporters	
b. Criticism to socialism-communism	

c. Criticism to the Government	
d. Criticism to the state of economy and health system	
e. Reference to the crisis	
f. Support to others' criticism	
g. Support to victims	
7. Tone	
a. Humorous	
i. Dark Humor	References to death, fatal fate, racism, and other themes related to morbid fascination.
ii. Funny story	
iii. Irony	
iv. Parody	
v. Sarcasm	
b. Neutral	
c. Serious	
i. Anger	
ii. Disappointment	
iii. Grief	
iv. Hope	
8. Type of meme	
a. Nucleus	
b. Satellite	

Appendix 2: Memes Database