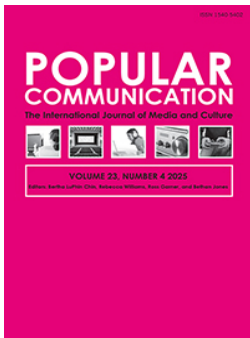


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Can political internet memes influence information selection of young adults? Examining the mediating roles of issue-specific interest, perceived issue importance, and humor

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the potential of political internet memes as stimulators of political information selection by examining the mediating roles of issue-specific interest, perceived issue importance, and humor. In the run-up to a national popular vote, we exposed 584 Swiss adolescents to political and non-political internet memes in a randomized between-subjects online experiment. Although no direct or indirect effects on information selection were observed, results strongly suggest that political memes—and, to a lesser extent, non-political memes—raised interest in political issues and increased their perceived importance. Our analysis yields novel insights into how political learning unfolds within digital information environments, which are discussed in the concluding section of the paper.

Social media has transformed the way we seek, encounter, and select information. This particularly applies to the political realm, where platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok have become important sources for political information (Newman et al., 2025). In the study at hand, we focus on political internet memes (in short: memes) as a widespread form of political information. Political internet memes tackle public policy issues, collective problems, or societal conflicts, and present them in a humorous manner (Johann & Bülow, 2019). While research has predominantly examined the content of political internet memes (e.g., McLoughlin & Southern, 2021), the current study focuses on their effects. More specifically, we investigate whether exposure to political internet memes triggers subsequent political information selection and the underlying mechanisms of such an effect.

We focus on young people as a population for whom social media have particularly strongly displaced traditional media as information sources (Newman et al., 2025). Evidence suggests that adolescents no longer feel that their concerns are addressed by traditional outlets of political information (Newman et al., 2022). Consequently, adolescents are less likely to actively search for political news, instead encountering such information on social media, a tendency that has been broadly reflected in incidental news exposure research in general (e.g., Kim et al., 2013; Wieland & Kleinen von Königslöw, 2020). Given this tendency, the question of how they select from the information they encounter becomes particularly important.

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Young people not only find political information on social media, but also express their opinions there (Kim et al., 2016). New forms of lifestyle politics—i.e., “the politicization of everyday life choices” (de Moor, 2017, p. 181)—have emerged as forms of engagement with politics frequently adopted by young adults. Thus, social media has also given rise to new formats of information-sharing, such as internet memes (Lindgren, 2017; Willmore & Hocking, 2017). Memes have evolved from simple jokes into a widespread tool used for democratic deliberation (Denisova, 2019; Shifman, 2014). As a complement to traditional outlets, memes serve as an important source of political information for young people, by packaging complex issues in an entertaining way (Cortesi & Gasser, 2015).

Overall, the effects of the transformation of the way we search, encounter, and select political information and participation are controversial. Given the potential of social media, some scholars see new forms of political information-seeking and participatory behavior as an opportunity for increased accessibility to information and political engagement (e.g., Lyons, 2019; Xenos et al., 2014). In contrast, others emphasize that the shift from traditional mass media to social media may reinforce a digital divide (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019).

While most studies on this topic focus on news and political information on social media in general, there is little empirical evidence on the effects of memes as audiences’ sources of political information. For instance, previous studies examined the role of partisanship in the effectiveness of political memes (Galipeau, 2023; Huntington, 2020; Kim et al., 2023), audiences’ meme readings (Lundqvist, 2024), effects of multimodal message framing in memes (Bülow & Johann, 2023) as well as the effects of the messages’ tonality on the memes’ credibility and persuasiveness (Wasike, 2022). Research has also shown that memes affect political engagement (Zhang & Pinto, 2021), emotions, and perceptions of the presented messages (Akram et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2016). Moreover, humor has been shown to play an important role in cognitive and affective outcomes of meme exposure (Gardner et al., 2021; Myrick et al., 2021). However, despite its democratic importance, the question of whether political memes also affect information-seeking, and patterns of information selection in particular, still remains unanswered.

This study examines the effects of memeified political information on users’ consecutive information selection. Specifically, we investigate the mediating roles of users’ issue-specific interest, perceived issue importance, and perceived humor as reactions to meme exposure. To test these effects, we conducted a randomized 3×2 between-subjects online experiment with Swiss adolescents, who were exposed to two types of memes (political meme vs. non-political meme vs. no meme). To enhance generalizability, we varied the political topic of the memes, which referred to one of two political initiatives at the time (“No-Tobacco-Ads” vs. “Stamp Duties”). In doing so, we aimed to contribute to the ongoing debate on the role of social media-induced forms of political information selection. Additionally, the results extend our understanding of audience-related effects of modern political entertainment formats, such as memes.

Literature review

Defining internet memes

Internet memes have become an integral part of online communication. Young users, in particular, have integrated memes into their daily social media repertoire (Burton, 2019), serving as a means of collective expression and social bonding (Johann, 2022; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik,

2019). Memes have evolved as an everyday practice of conscious and creative adaptation and dissemination of online content to the extent that they now comprise an essential component of digital culture (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). In this way, they represent the appropriative nature of modern online communication environments. Memes diffuse to broader publics through constant adaptation and replication in different contexts, which often differ substantially from their original source (Esteves & Meikle, 2015). Although memes spread at the micro-level, they also lead to meso-level effects, such as altering the attitudes, behaviors, and actions of social groups (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

Numerous definitions of internet memes have evolved over the past decade, each with different perspectives on the memetic spread of online content. For instance, Shifman (2013, 2014) describes internet memes as units of popular culture with common characteristics in content, form, or stance, diffusing through imitation and creating shared cultural experiences. Similarly, Denisova (2019) refers to internet memes as digital units of expression which are redistributed through the participation of users and convey a specific meaning or emotion. While Davison (2012) mainly highlights their humorous nature, Dynel (2016) locates humorous potential in memes' visual and verbal elements, meaning they can evoke humor without necessarily intending it. Johann and Bülow (2019) emphasize their recurring references to popular culture and politics. From a multimodal point of view, so-called image macros—combinations of text and (moving) images—have emerged as the best-known representatives of memes (Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Lankshear & Knobel, 2019). Memes are in constant tension between innovation and permanence; users must adapt a meme in a way that renders its content unique, while still being recognizable (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Thus, meme literacy is key to understanding, creating, and consuming memes (Denisova, 2019; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

Based on the discussed research, we understand an internet meme as the sum of multimodal units of expression with a certain degree of common characteristics in content, form, and/or stance that often but not necessarily refer in a humorous way to cultural events and phenomena and diffuse online through constant adaptation or replication by many users.

Political internet memes as infotainment

The last decade has seen a “memeification of political discourse” (Bulatovic, 2019, p. 250). As young people increasingly rely on low-threshold forms of political engagement (Kim et al., 2016) and humor as a strategy for political expression on social media (Vraga et al., 2015; Vromen et al., 2016), it is not surprising that political memes have become an integral part of young users' media repertoires (Lindgren, 2017; Willmore & Hocking, 2017). We conceptualize political internet memes broadly as memetic communication about public policy issues, collective problems, and societal conflicts, not only party politics and electoral campaigns (Johann & Bülow, 2019). In this context, political humor serves the creation of shared meanings (Chagas et al., 2019).

Research has shown that political humor and entertainment have positive effects on people's attention (Brugman et al., 2023; Xenos & Becker, 2009), political interest (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Lawrason, 2017), and (issue-specific) political knowledge (Becker & Bode, 2018). Young adults, in particular, are more immersed in political entertainment than in traditional news (Boukes et al., 2015). For example, Hollander (2005) found that political entertainment does not truly help individuals remember political information, but has a positive effect on the

recognition of that information. This is relevant for memes, which often recontextualize the same information in many facets.

Moreover, political humor has the potential for shaping people's awareness of political issues and can influence viewers' perceptions of these issues. Boukes (2019), for example, found that political entertainment increases the knowledge, understanding, and the salience of an issue in the public and the political agenda. Similarly, Feezell (2018) demonstrated that being exposed to political information on social media has the potential to raise the perceived importance of certain political topics, indicating that "agenda setting can occur through social media platforms via incidental exposure to political information and that this effect is strongest among the least politically interested" (Feezell, 2018, p. 483). Given the ongoing debate on youth political disengagement (Kitanova, 2020), this agenda setting effect might also be applicable in the context of political memes, as the use of digital media can be seen as compensation for the decline of youth disengagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Therefore, humorous political memes might serve as agenda setters, fostering a political issue's salience.

Cortesi and Gasser (2015) emphasize that memes are an important new source of political information for young users, as they manage to convey important and complex issues relevant to them and their social group in an interesting and entertaining way. In this vein, memes serve as humorous vehicles for political information that complement traditional information resources. The low barriers to the consumption, production, and distribution of memes, for instance via meme generators, offer new avenues for users to engage in politics and political events. In this way, political memes enable the expression of political opinions and criticism, as well as the diffusion of political information. With sarcasm as the most prevailing form of memetic humor (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015), political memes usually denounce political decisions and actors (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Shifman (2014) even argues that memes represent bottom-up and digital incarnations of classical political entertainment formats. The main difference between memes and more traditional forms of political entertainment is their great flexibility in terms of context and content, as well as the lack of institutionalization (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021).

While much research on political entertainment has been done in the context of traditional political entertainment formats, memes remain largely unexplored in this process. Beyond their growing prevalence in young people's media repertoires, memes may have specific features that make them triggers of further cognitive engagement. As condensed multimodal formats, they repack complex political issues into simple, recognizable templates, potentially lowering cognitive entry costs (Wong & Holyoak, 2021). Moreover, affective cues such as the use of humor may increase attention and curiosity (Chmel et al., 2024). These characteristics suggest that political memes may not only convey information, but also increase adolescents' motivation to engage in political issues. Although empirical work on the effects of memes is still emerging, prior research on political entertainment and early meme studies provide sufficiently consistent evidence to formulate directional expectations. We therefore derive the following hypotheses:

H1 Exposure to political memes increases adolescents' issue-specific interest.

H2 Exposure to political memes increases adolescents' perceived issue importance.

Internet memes as a gateway to political information

As an integral part of digital culture, memes hold significance not only in online environments, but also in the offline world. Previous studies indicate memes' potential to influence political participation both online and offline (e.g., Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Johann, 2022; Johann et al., 2023; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Williams, 2020). Political entertainment is genuinely connected with the idea of participatory outcomes (Cao & Brewer, 2008) rooted in political entertainment's power to foster people's sense of self-efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Becker, 2011). Following this idea, Xenos and Becker (2009) demonstrated in their research on information-seeking and political learning that the consumption of different political entertainment formats has a positive effect on information selection and information transfer during the subsequent exposure to hard news—especially among individuals with low political interest.

Boukes's (2019) previously mentioned work on political entertainment's significance for issue salience revealed not only its agenda-setting potential, but also its potential to affect behavioral outcomes. Using the example of a Dutch satire show, the study demonstrated that Google searches on the topic of the show rapidly increased after it aired, indicating a catalyst effect. Similarly, a panel survey among American citizens indicated that the consumption of political entertainment fosters the use of traditional news sources (Long et al., 2021). The phenomenon that political entertainment has positive effects on the consumption of political content in other (hard) news sources is also referred to as the gateway hypothesis (Baum, 2003). Specifically, it claims that the consumption of "entertainment-based programming that includes political information could affect people's subsequent media use through increases in knowledge" (Myers & Hmielowski, 2021, p. 4420). Previous studies have also shown that political interest benefits from exposure to political information on social media—especially when political interest is low (Feezell, 2018; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Bartsch and Schneider (2014) similarly demonstrated political interest's mediating role in the relationship between political entertainment and subsequent information seeking, which includes information selection (Rouse & Rouse, 1984). Similarly, exposure to political memes may be a driver for adolescents' political information selection via political interest.

There is also broad evidence that a political issue's salience affects people's attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Weaver, 1991). Specifically, perceived issue importance, referred to as the extent to which someone is deeply concerned about an issue, proves to be a prerequisite for information processing and political reasoning (Chen, 2018; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Meta-analytic evidence for research on motivated information management demonstrates effects of issue importance for the association between uncertainty discrepancy, outcome assessments, self-efficacy, and resulting information behaviors (Kuang & Wilson, 2020). In line with the idea of political memes' agenda-setting function (Boukes, 2019; Feezell, 2018), we expect that perceived issue importance also triggers issue-consistent information selection after exposure to such political memes.

Given the growing importance of social media and its content formats for young people's information selection, and the increasing penetration of politics into the memesphere, we expect that adolescents are increasingly encountering political information in memes. Based on previous considerations, we argue that political memes can channel young adults' attention to political issues, in that the easily accessible humorous portrayal sparks motivation to learn more via traditional news sources. Previous research with a focus on more traditional forms of political entertainment demonstrated that political interest and perceived importance are crucial to

behavioral outcomes. If memes lower entry costs and elicit humor, they may not only increase issue-specific interest and perceived importance, but also translate these reactions into a higher likelihood of selecting issue-consistent information. Therefore, in the specific context of political memes, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3 Adolescents' issue-specific interest mediates the relationship between the exposure to political memes and the likelihood of selecting issue-consistent information.

H4 Adolescents' perceived issue importance mediates the relationship between the exposure to political memes and the likelihood of selecting issue-consistent information.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the overall conceptual model of this study.

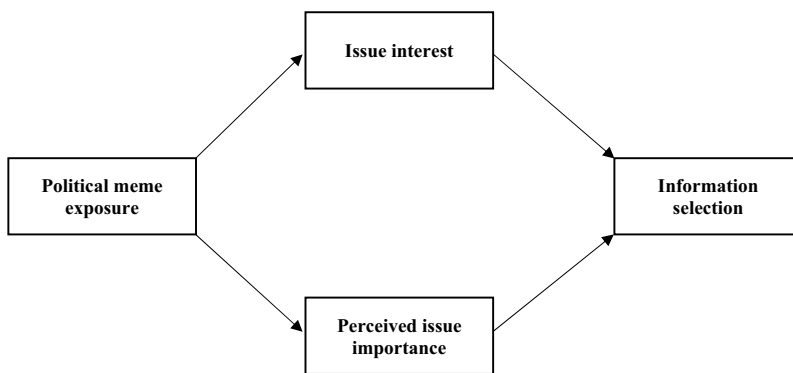


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study.

The role of humor in the effects of political internet memes

Humor is deeply entwined with the functional logic of memes. However, although humor is often linked to the nature of memes, political memes do not necessarily need to be perceived as humorous, and those that do use humor as a discursive strategy may contain serious meanings (Dyrel, 2016). Generally, perceived humor is related to individual and contextual factors (Martin & Ford, 2018). For instance, Matthes and Rauchfleisch (2013) demonstrated that the perceived funniness of political content depends on recipients' political knowledge. Boukes et al. (2015) found that the perceived funniness of political entertainment serves as a link between political humor and individual attitudes. In the context of memes, previous studies found that the pronounced style of humor in memes plays a crucial mediating role when it comes to the recipients' interpretation (Gardner et al., 2021; Torres-Marín et al., 2023) and that perceived humor in memes relies on the individual ability to regulate emotions (Akram et al., 2020). Research also shows that attitude-congruent humor—often evoked through memes' specific modality—is key when processing and evaluating memetic content (Galipeau, 2023; Huntington, 2020; Molina, 2025; Wong & Holyoak, 2021).

While most studies in the context of political entertainment examine genuinely humorous content, such as political satire formats, the role of perceived humor has

often been neglected. As the application of humor tends to be complex in political memes, ranging from simple cues to cover serious meanings to more hedonistic forms of entertainment, we aim to shed light on the mediating role of perceived humor in the individual process of adolescents' political meme perception. In this vein, we argue that exposure to political memes influences users' perceived humor, which triggers issue-specific interest and perceived issue importance. This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H5 Adolescents' perceived humor mediates the relation between the exposure to political memes (in contrast to non-political memes) and their issue-specific interest.

H6 Adolescents' perceived humor mediates the relation between the exposure to political memes (in contrast to non-political memes) and their perceived issue importance.

Methods

We conducted a randomized 3 (meme) \times 2 (issue) between-subjects online experiment with 584 Swiss adolescents aged 18–30 years. Depending on the assigned experimental condition, participants were exposed to different meme types (political, non-political, or none) in the context of two political issues (the prohibition of tobacco advertisements targeting children and taxes on equity capital). Following meme exposure, they were asked to indicate their personal interest in the respective issue and perceived issue importance. In addition, we recorded information selection by asking them which article they would like to read from a set of purported news teaser items.

Sample and procedure

All participants were recruited by a commercial panel provider (respondi) and invited to participate in the study. After providing their consent, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the six experimental conditions and directed to an online questionnaire. Participants were told that the study was about an upcoming Swiss popular vote on two initiatives, which took place two weeks after the study. The first initiative dealt with the prohibition of tobacco advertisements targeting children and adolescents (“Yes to protecting children and young adults from tobacco advertising – No tobacco ads for children and young adults”). In the second initiative, voters could decide whether Swiss companies should be obliged to pay taxes on equity capital they raise; for example, by issuing shares (“Amendment of the Federal Act on Stamp Duties”). Both initiatives were the subject of nationwide referendums held on 13 February 2022, embedded in Switzerland's system of direct democracy. Both proposals were the focus of national political campaigns and media coverage in the weeks before the vote, and turnout (44%) was typical to above-average for Swiss federal referendums, suggesting that these were salient political issues for citizens (Freiburghaus, 2023).

After respondents provided basic information on their sociodemographic characteristics, general interest in politics, political ideology, party identification, and frequency of exposure to memes, they were presented with two memes as experimental stimuli. All participants first received a brief neutral description of the

upcoming national referendum on the two initiatives. Only after this introduction were they randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. Thus, any differences between meme conditions and the control group reflect the added effect of meme exposure above and beyond a common issue prime. Following exposure, the dependent variables were measured (issue-specific interest, perceived issue importance, and information selection).

The questionnaire ended with a debriefing explaining the actual goal of the study and that the memes shown were created solely for the study. Of the 617 participants who took part in the experiment, 33 were excluded to secure data quality. These participants either failed to correctly answer at least one of two quality-check items or spent fewer than 4 seconds on the pages displaying the stimuli. The final sample included 584 participants, and the average age was 24.5 years ($SD = 3.68$), 54.2% possessed the highest Swiss school degree (Matura), and 58.4% were female.

Stimuli and experimental factors

Two factors were systematically varied in the experiment. The first (“issue”) reflected the political initiative the memes referred to, which was either the “No-Tobacco-Ads” or the “Stamp Duties” initiative. The second factor (“meme type”) reflected whether the memes did or did not deal with a political topic, and varied on three levels. In the political meme condition (*pmc*), the memes presented referred to the respective initiative and consisted of a picture and a text element (see Figure 2 for an example). As pictures, we used popular meme templates (meme template 1: “drake-posting,” meme template 2: “distracted boyfriend”), whereas the text part was created by the authors and referred to the initiatives in a humorous way. In the non-political meme condition (*n-pmc*), the same templates were used to avoid any confounding caused by the mere format of meme presentation. The text part, however, was non-political and referred to cats or skipping ads in YouTube videos. Finally, we included

A Political meme



B Non-political meme



Figure 2. Examples (distracted boyfriend meme): political (A) and non-political version (B).

Note. Political meme translation: Woman with blue shirt: “Protecting children and adolescents from tobacco consumption”, man in the center: “Swiss Confederation”, woman with red shirt: “Advertising tobacco products”; Non-political meme translation: woman with blue shirt: “Expensive cat tree”, man in the center: “cats”, woman with red shirt: “cardboard box”.

a control condition (*cc*), where participants saw no content whatsoever. This experimental design enabled us to determine the effects of memes in general (by comparing them to situations in which people receive no information), but also the effects of political memes in comparison to their non-political counterparts. This is important since both meme types have a humorous component, which might lead to effects regardless of their political loading.

Measures

Issue-specific interest

After stimulus exposure, participants rated their interest in the respective issue (“I am interested in [issue 1: the initiative to protect children and youths from tobacco advertisements] [issue 2: the amendment of the federal act on stamp duties]”) using a 5-point single-item scale (1 = “Does not apply at all” to 5 = “Fully applies”) ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.17$).

Issue importance

Participants used the same 5-point scale to indicate to what degree they perceived the respective issue as important, using three items (“The [issue] is important to me personally,” “The [issue] is important for my friends and family,” “The [issue] is important for our society.”). All items formed a mean scale with good reliability ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.99$, $\alpha = 0.83$).

Humor

Those who were presented with memes of any type (i.e., political or non-political) indicated how funny they found each of the memes presented to them immediately after exposure (“I found this meme funny”) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Does not apply at all” to 5 = “Fully applies”). For the analyses, we calculated the mean for both memes ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.12$).

Political information selection

Participants were presented a selection of four article headlines and were asked to select the article they would like to read (only one pick was possible). The four headlines referred to political or non-political issues and were presented in a randomized order. Two of the headlines were political and implied an article offering hard news about the two initiatives (headline 1: “This is what the SP’s referendum on stamp duties is about,” headline 2: “The initiative ‘Yes to protecting children and youths from tobacco advertisements’ simply explained”). The non-political headlines suggested articles on soft news not related to the two initiatives (headline 3: “Meteorologists alarmed: Too little precipitation this winter,” headline 4: “2022 Winter Olympics: Good prospects for Swiss athletes”). Participants could also indicate not being interested in reading any of the articles, which 15.8% did. Most participants chose to read the article on the tobacco initiative (34.6%) followed by the stamp duties article (19.3%), the article on the Olympic games (16.6%), and the article on winter precipitation (13.7%). Participants’ headline selection was recoded into a new variable reflecting issue-consistent (1) and non-consistent (0) selection (i.e., cases where the article did or did not deal with the issue of the political memes).

Results

Manipulation check

Before proceeding to the main analyses, we verified whether participants realized the political loading of the memes they saw, by indicating to what extent they “addressed a serious political issue” (5-point Likert scale, 1 = “Does not apply at all” to 5 = “Fully applies”). The mean difference between the meme conditions showed that most participants were aware of the memes’ intended character ($M_{pmc} = 3.58$, $SD_{pmc} = 0.93$; $M_{n-pmc} = 1.54$, $SD_{n-pmc} = 0.81$, $t(374) = 22.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$). These results indicate that participants themselves perceived the referendum-related memes as addressing a political issue, consistent with our conceptualization.

Main analyses

Table 1 shows the results of three path models.¹ In the first, the two issue conditions (“No-Tobacco-Ads” and “Stamp Duties”) are pooled, whereas the second and third models treat them separately to identify potential differences. The results clearly indicate that political memes increase issue-specific interest, $b = 0.35$, $p = .002$, and perceived issue importance, $b = 0.27$, $p = .004$, thus supporting *H1* and *H2*. Interestingly, we also find non-political memes to increase issue-specific interest, $b = 0.22$, $p = .050$, although to a lesser extent. As the two issue-specific models show, the effects did not occur to the same extent across the stamp duty and the tobacco conditions. Participants exposed to the stamp duty meme developed a stronger interest in the initiative and an increase in perceived importance, whereas those in the tobacco meme condition only showed higher levels of interest. The weak positive

Table 1. Effects of political and non-political memes on issue-specific interest, perceived issue importance, and information selection.

	Issue-specific interest			Perceived issue importance			Information selection		
	b	(SE)	p	b	(SE)	p	Odds ratio	(SE)	p
Full model (N = 584)									
<i>Ref.: Control</i>									
Non-political memes	0.22	(.11)	.050	0.10	(.10)	.337	0.860	(.21)	.500
Political memes	0.35	(.11)	.002	0.27	(.10)	.004	0.804	(.20)	.318
<i>Endogenous variables</i>									
Issue-specific interest	—	—	—	0.78	(.05)	.000	1.235	(.12)	.109
Perceived issue importance	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.659	(.13)	.003
Stamp duty model (N = 284)									
<i>Ref.: Control</i>									
Non-political memes	0.16	(.16)	.318	−0.02	(.14)	.874	0.804	(.30)	.025
Political memes	0.34	(.15)	.023	0.34	(.12)	.004	0.734	(.28)	.347
<i>Endogenous variables</i>									
Issue-specific interest	—	—	—	0.63	(.07)	.000	1.616	(.27)	.025
Perceived issue importance	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.268	(.26)	.309
Tobacco model (N = 300)									
<i>Ref.: Control</i>									
Non-political memes	0.24	(.14)	.090	0.17	(.13)	.188	0.892	(.27)	.695
Political memes	0.40	(.16)	.011	0.24	(.14)	.092	0.944	(.31)	.853
<i>Endogenous variables</i>									
Issue-specific interest	—	—	—	0.71	(.07)	.000	0.948	(.15)	.730
Perceived issue importance	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.958	(.38)	.011

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

association of non-political memes with issue-specific interest in the pooled model may also reflect unspecific engagement or mood effects in an already politically primed context rather than genuine content-related political stimulation. This effect disappears in the issue-specific analyses. We therefore treat it cautiously.

We further assumed that adolescents' interest (*H3*) in the issue and perceived importance (*H4*) would increase the likelihood of searching for further issue-related information. Our results support this assumption only for perceived issue importance, $OR = 1.659, p = .003$, but not issue-specific interest, $OR = 1.235, p = .109$ (*H3* rejected, *H4* supported). Again, there are issue-specific differences in that the positive influence of perceived importance on the likelihood of selecting issue-consistent headlines only occurred in the tobacco group, $OR = 1.958, p = .011$ and not in the stamp duty group, $OR = 1.268, p = .309$. However, in the latter group, increased interest was positively related to selecting consistent headlines, $OR = 1.616, p = .025$. This last finding might seem contradictory since interest had no effect in the pooled model; however, this can be explained by the slightly negative association between interest and information selection in the tobacco group, which cancels out the relationship when issue groups are pooled.

Based on the bivariate relationships described above, we can determine the indirect effects of non-political and political meme exposure on information selection. Only one indirect path was significant. Political meme exposure led to issue-consistent information selection via an increased perceived importance of the issue, $b_{ind} = 0.14, p = .030$. However, because the concurrent direct effect of political meme exposure on information selection was negative, $b_{dir} = -0.22, p = .372$, the total effect of political meme exposure became nearly non-existent, $b_{tot} = -0.01, p = .981$. Looking at both issues separately, no significant indirect effects were observed, which is likely due to the smaller sample sizes.

We have already seen that even non-political memes can have positive effects on predictors of issue-specific information selection, particularly on issue-specific interest. But why does this effect occur? One possibility we discussed in the theoretical section is that memes in general can trigger humor, thereby encouraging recipients to turn to political information. If that is the case, those who thought the memes were funny should also show an increased interest in the issues. To test this assumption, we extended our original path model by adding humor as a mediator between meme exposure and the two original mediators (i.e., interest and importance). Note that the control group was not exposed to any memes, which is why the following analyses compare participants' humor ratings of the political and non-political memes. The results show that participants thought the non-political memes to be funnier than the political ones, $b = -0.42, p < .001$. However, as indicated by the respective means, political memes still evoked a humorous reaction ($M_{pmc} = 2.90, SD_{pmc} = 1.12, M_{n-pmc} = 3.31, SD_{n-pmc} = 1.07$). This difference consistently occurred in both issue conditions (stamp duty initiative: $b = -0.42, p = .01$; tobacco initiative: $b = -0.40, p = .014$). The analysis of the pooled sample further shows that meme-induced humor was positively associated with issue-specific interest, $b = 0.21, p = .001$, and perceived importance, $b = 0.19, p = .001$. However, this pattern can be mainly traced back to the stamp duty group, rather than the tobacco group (association with issue-specific interest: stamp duty, $b = 0.26, p = .002$, tobacco: $b = 0.12, p = .122$; association with perceived issue importance: stamp duty: $b = 0.24, p < .001$, tobacco: $b = 0.11, p = .100$). The mediating role of humor predicted by *H5* and *H6* was supported by the indirect effects observed in the pooled sample. Political memes did affect issue-specific interest, $b_{ind} =$

-0.09, $p = .012$, and perceived importance, $b_{ind} = -0.08$, $p = .009$, via perceived humor. Note that the negative coefficient indicates the relative indirect effect of political memes compared to non-political ones. It shows that non-political memes increase interest and perceived importance via humor to a significantly larger degree than do the political memes. At the same time, however, political memes exert a stronger direct positive effect on both outcomes (issue-specific interest: $b = .218$, $p = .070$, importance: $b = .259$, $p = .013$). The pattern was again especially pronounced in the stamp duty group, where the relative indirect effects of political memes via humor on issue interest, $b_{ind} = -0.11$, $p = .038$, and importance, $b_{ind} = -0.10$, $p = .027$, were both statistically significant. Here, the direct effects of political memes were again stronger than those of the non-political memes (issue-specific interest: $b = .286$, $p = .002$, perceived issue importance: $b = .463$, $p < .001$). In the tobacco group, none of the above-described effects (direct or indirect) could be observed, indicating that there were no differences between political and non-political memes. Consequently, $H5$ and $H6$ are only supported for the stamp duty issue.

Discussion

Based on the idea that memes have become a frequent means of political expression, especially for the younger audiences (e.g., Cortesi & Gasser, 2015; Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Johann, 2022; Lindgren, 2017; Lundqvist, 2024; Willmore & Hocking, 2017), the study at hand tested whether political memes could increase interest in political issues, perceived issue importance, and ultimately lead young adults to seek further information on the issue. A comparison with participants who received no information and participants exposed to non-political memes clearly showed that political memes can interest people in a political issue and signal them that the issue is currently important, which is a very encouraging finding from an normative point of view. Given that all participants had been informed about the upcoming vote in the experimental instructions, the small increase in issue-specific interest among those who viewed non-political memes might partly reflect heightened general engagement in the task or positive affect rather than a direct political effect of the humorous content itself.

The findings can be interpreted in light of prior research on traditional political entertainment formats (e.g., Boukes, 2019; Boukes et al., 2015; Brugman et al., 2023; Feezell, 2018; Lawrason, 2017; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Similar to satire and late-night comedy, political memes in our study increase issue-specific interest and perceived importance, particularly for the complex tax issue. However, unlike some studies on the gateway role of political entertainment, we do not observe a robust direct increase in information selection behavior. This suggests that memeified political information may borrow some of the motivational advantages of traditional political entertainment (interest, salience) without necessarily reproducing its downstream effects on subsequent behavioral outcomes.

Our results do not support the claim that political memes lead to the selection of more issue-consistent information. Rather, the data suggest that despite a positive indirect effect of political meme consumption on information selection mediated via enhanced interest and importance, memes also seem to trigger negative effects compensating for their positive ones. One such factor could be the comprehensibility of political memes. Understanding a political joke usually requires at least some issue-specific knowledge, especially when little contextual information is available and when the underlying issue is complex (Martin &

Ford, 2018). Failing to understand a meme could have a discouraging effect, reducing the motivation to seek out further information on an issue. We aimed to test this explanation with an additional analysis based on a short question we posed after meme exposure, which asked whether the participant felt able to explain the memes in a few sentences at the end of the interview. Answers were given on a 5-point scale (1 = “I do not feel able to explain the memes” to 5 = “I feel perfectly able to explain the memes”). Those exposed to political memes scored considerably lower on this scale, $M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.24$, than the non-political meme group, $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.05$, $b = -0.61$, $p < .001$. At the same time, those who understood the political memes were the ones who expressed a higher interest, $b = 0.28$, $p < .001$, and perceived higher issue importance, $b = 0.18$, $p < .001$. Therefore, further exploration of the role of meme comprehensibility would be an interesting avenue for future research.

Moreover, the absence of a meme effect on information selection may also be attributable to the specific experimental conditions in our study. Participants were exposed to only two memes on a given topic, presented in close succession. It is possible that this simply constituted too small a “dose” of memes to trigger the expected effect. In addition, the context in which the memes were presented may have contributed to weaker effects. Although their design corresponded to actual meme prototypes, they were not presented to participants on an authentic social media platform. This lack of realism may have reduced their potential impact. Furthermore, memes on social media platforms are usually embedded in a broader social context, which includes not only those who share the meme as communicators but also those who respond to it by commenting, liking, or sharing. Such factors may, in real-world settings, amplify or attenuate the effects assumed here. In our view, extending the presentation of memes to include a more realistic technical and social context represents a promising avenue for future research.

An intriguing pattern in our data is that non-political memes were perceived as funnier than political memes, yet still showed a small positive association with issue-specific interest and, via humor, perceived importance in the pooled models. One way to interpret this is through the lens of the blurring of political and non-political content in meme cultures (Chagas, 2023; Mihăilescu, 2024). Even apparently non-political memes (here: about cats) may contribute to a general humorous framing of the online environment in which political issues are already salient (here: the upcoming vote). This could foster a more playful, low-threat orientation toward the issues, which in turn may make it slightly easier to engage with them. At the same time, memetic humor has also been discussed as a form of depoliticization, where political actors and issues are treated as just another object of entertainment rather than deliberation (e.g., Cui, 2024). Our findings are consistent with this ambivalence: non-political memes maximize humor, but their political “spillover” on interest and importance is somewhat weak and unstable. Nevertheless, a possible effect of merely funny, non-political memes should not be ruled out prematurely. Research on how emotions influence individual judgments shows that incidental emotions elicited in one context can spill over into another, affecting decisions that are entirely unrelated to the original feeling (see Lerner et al., 2015, for a review). Although such spill-over effects have been examined chiefly for negative emotions such as anger and fear, they also occur for positive emotions (Wyer et al., 2019). In our study, the non-political memes put participants in a positive, humorous mood, which may have spilled over and affected their subsequent judgments about unrelated matters—i.e., their interest in specific political issues and the perceived importance of those issues.

Digging deeper into how political memes trigger effects on issue-specific interest and perceived issue importance, we also examined the role played by humor as a result of meme reception. Both political and non-political memes caused a humorous reaction in participants, which was somewhat stronger in the latter group. As predicted, this reaction was positively related to issue-specific interest and perceived importance, showing that humor plays a central role in the effects we examined (Akram et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2021). This is important because it shows that even non-political memes, which did not refer to the political issues examined, have the potential to raise interest and increase importance. Therefore, our results point to differential pathways through which political and non-political memes can affect the two outcomes. While humor more likely results from non-political memes (e.g., cat jokes), which follow the indirect pathway, the positive influence of political memes seems to rely less on a humorous reaction than on a direct effect on interest and importance. While our analysis does not explicitly account for the (mis)alignment between the humorous stance implied by the memes and participants' own attitudes toward the two initiatives, research on memetic humor and partisanship suggests that ideology-congruent content is more likely to lead to positive effects, whereas incongruent content may be dismissed or even backfire (e.g., Galipeau, 2023; Huntington, 2020; Kim et al., 2023). Future studies should further test whether meme-induced humor, interest, and information selection depend on whether the meme supports or opposes audiences' prior views.

There were also differences between the two issue conditions presented in the experimental study. Although the general direction of the effects was similar for the stamp duty and the tobacco initiative, they were clearly more pronounced for the former, which raises the question as to what distinguishes the two issues. Although we can only speculate about this point, it seems likely that the complexity and prior issue knowledge play a critical role when considering the effects of memes. For most of our Swiss participants, the goal of the tobacco initiative was probably relatively easy to grasp, namely prohibiting tobacco advertisements that target children and youths as vulnerable groups. The goal of the stamp duty initiative, on the other hand, was likely more difficult to comprehend. Participants first had to know that stamp duties are taxes (even the Swiss expression "Stempelabgaben" does not directly indicate this). Moreover, they would have to know who is obligated to pay this tax. Without this knowledge, the meme is barely understandable and is unlikely to engender a humorous reaction (which is reflected by actual data) (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013). If this is the case, how did the political memes on stamp duties still exert their relatively strong effects? One explanation may be that, although some people did not understand the joke, they could still have been aware of the fact that the meme was intended to be humorous, supporting memes' format as a genuine humor cue (Dynel, 2016). This expectation could have motivated them to further explore the issue to understand the joke. However, as we have shown above, failing to understand a meme tends to lead to decreased interest, which contradicts this assumption.

Our study has some limitations. First, our design embeds meme exposure in a context where participants were explicitly informed about an upcoming national vote on the issues at stake. This "vote prime" increases the situational salience of the initiatives in all conditions. While this mirrors real referendum campaigns, where voters are typically aware of upcoming ballots, it means that our results speak to the incremental effects of memes once an issue is already salient, rather than to meme exposure in the complete absence of prior political priming. Future studies

could include conditions without an explicit vote prime, or where the prime is administered after meme exposure, to test whether similar effects emerge under lower salience.

Second, we did not measure prior knowledge about the specific referendum issues, which would have allowed us to directly examine how knowledge moderates meme effects. However, random assignment of participants to experimental conditions should balance such prior knowledge across conditions in expectation, so that our between-group comparisons remain causally interpretable. Third, the same applies to existing issue-specific attitudes, which we deliberately did not measure prior to meme exposure in order to avoid potential context effects (Schwarz & Strack, 1991). Consequently, we are unable to quantify their (well-documented) influence on political information selection (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Stroud, 2008) as well as on issue-specific interest and perceived importance (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Nevertheless, any such influence is accounted for by the randomized experimental design. More importantly, however, we cannot test the possibility that issue-specific attitudes are the mechanism behind the differences in meme effects across the two topics. In this case, prior attitudes would serve as an issue-bound context factor, moderating the influence of memes on issue-specific interest, perceived importance, and information behavior. Fourth, although we used an experimental design, only the variables directly related to meme exposure in our model can be interpreted in a causal way (i.e., the effects on issue-specific interest and perceived importance). The relationships we observed between information selection as the final outcome and the two mediators cannot be interpreted as causal, although we took care that the article selection task we used to operationalize information selection was located at the end of the questionnaire. Fifth, due to the decision to measure respondents' reactions of humor specifically with regard to the memes they were presented, our study lacks information about the humorous state in the control group, which received no stimulus. On the one hand, it makes sense to specifically measure meme-induced humor; on the other hand, it would have been interesting to be able to compare humor across all groups. Future studies could compensate for this by employing a more general measure for participants' humorous reactions. Finally, it is important to mention that alternative mechanisms might have contributed to the effect of political memes on information selection – particularly media priming (see Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2009 for an overview). Although we did not find significant direct effects of political meme exposure on information selection, exposure to a meme addressing a political issue might increase the issue's cognitive accessibility, thereby making issue-consistent information selection more likely.

Our study shows that political memes are not merely funny internet content, but can indeed fulfill a democratically useful function, especially in audiences who are known to rely less on traditional sources of political information.

Note

1. Hypotheses were tested by fitting a path model using the Mplus 8.3 software package (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Because the dependent variable “information selection” is dichotomous, its associations with other variables in the model are estimated using a logit function. All other relationships are modeled linearly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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