

Political Themes in Memes: An Exploration of Ghanaian Online Memetic Discourse

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In a dynamic world where the line between the virtual and the physical is blurred, the power that memes produce in social change in both worlds cannot be overstated. Meme scholars acknowledge the growing interest in its unfolding utility across cultures. Specifically, this study sheds light on how African cartoon memes have become tools for seeking change in socio-political spheres. Analyzing three memes created by Ghana's renowned artist, "Tilapia Da Cartoonist," henceforth known as Tilapia, we engage with a rhetorical criticism that specifically utilizes Kenneth Burke's perspective by incongruity to uncover how memes are a form of public argument

that use humor, satire, incongruity, and indigenous artistic techniques to problematize political rhetoric. As a media activist, Tilapia capitalizes on visual discursive strategies to educate and incentivize the Ghanaian citizenry to demand change in online spaces and *tête-à-tête* where economic and political crises affect citizens. We conclude by discussing the importance of analyzing this new rhetorical trope – memes – and posing questions for future research.

Keywords: social media, Ghana, memes, cartoons, African rhetoric, sika mmpe dede

Meme engagement, or “meme-ing”¹ has emerged as a trendy and practical mode for public participation and freedom of expression in the digital world (Dawkins & Marshmallow, 2013). “Meme-ing” is often considered an approach toward social activism (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Mina, 2019). In the world of activism, meme engagement creates avenues for online communities to grow and advocate for change on a global scale. As these online communities garner more resources while motivating supporters, they can eventually constitute movements and counter-movements – a form of discursive activism that resists hegemonic culture or, on the flip side, an activism that encourages narcissism, polarization, hate, and propaganda (Mina, 2019; Zompetti, 2018).

¹ Although not a popular term, “meme-ing” has been used by some meme scholars to refer to the process of creating and sharing memes to communicate, influence public discourse, express identity and participate in cultural and political movements (Milner, 2012, Mina, 2019; Shifman, 2013).

West African memes, as predominantly satirical cartoons (Fiankor et al., 2017), are artistically curated visual discourses intended to seek and create positive change by mocking excesses of power, and by drawing public attention to socio-political follies (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). This type of meme seeks to drive change in society and serve as a historical marker that captures the socio-political climate of a given period (Jimoh, 2010). Oduro-Frimpong (2018) and Fiankor, Dzegblor, and Kwame (2017) describe contemporary Ghanaian cartoons as forms of critical entertainment and modes of resistance. They argue that beyond their humorous nature, Ghanaian cartoons articulate and reflect divergent viewpoints on a wide range of national issues. These memes also offer unique criticism that encourages public awareness and involvement regarding the issues they reflect. Despite these techniques' importance and artistic value, microscopic investigation has occurred concerning Ghanaian artists and their works, including the most prominent and provocative artist-activists, such as Tilapia Da Cartoonist.

Interestingly, only one study (Elewosi et al., 2023) has explored Tilapia's works' specific nature and rhetorical power. Given this scant scholarly attention, we investigate the rhetoric of Tilapia's "*sika mmpe dede*" memes by examining his creative strategies that amass loyal followers, heighten public influence, and foster an online sense of community. Along these lines, we spotlight the rhetorical, artistic, and strategic lessons that Tilapia's works provide. Ultimately, our study is among the few to uniquely explore the rhetorical implications of memes in general, particularly contemporary Ghanaian memetics. Additionally, this essay can amplify our general awareness of the intersections between memes, rhetoric, and political participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contextualizing Our Current Understanding of Memes

Given the rise in social media use, meme engagement has become a trendy and practical mode for public participation and freedom of expression concerning various issues (Dawkins & Marshmallow, 2013; Mina, 2019). Memes are new forms of digital dialogue, from the latest movies in theatres and favorite sports teams to social justice and human rights issues. As a mechanism to insert critical messages into online conversations, a meme is a valuable communication tool that reveals the frustrations of a populace,

enables any user to interject their perspectives, and creates a digital space for expressing different perspectives (Mina, 2019). Consequently, memes catalyze cultural development (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015) and are prisms “for shedding light on aspects of contemporary digital culture” (Shifman, 2012, p. 190).

What constitutes a meme has been contested since its inception (Donovan, Dreyfuss, & Friedberg, 2022; Mina, 2019; Shifman, 2012, 2013; Zabolnova, 2022), but there is general agreement that attribution of the term *meme* is given to Richard Dawkins in his work, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Despite this, we still lack consensus on what constitutes a meme (Díaz, 2013). Wiggins and Bowers (2015) define memes as humorous artifacts of participatory digital culture. Shifman (2013) characterizes memes as digital objects consciously created and circulated that humorously resonate among users (Donovan et al., 2022). Moreover, Mina (2019) notes how a meme is simply a “unit of a culture, a piece of online media that is shared and remixed over time within a community” (p. 6). She stipulates that humor is often embedded in memes to help provide levity while discussing complicated issues; occasionally, humorous memes tell the hard truth. To bring public attention to systemic problems like racial profiling, memes can be performed as a type of mockery to criticize, and then to incentivize political action against injustices (Mina, 2019).

Memetic Significance

Ultimately, memes can yield substantial impacts in a variety of different ways. Shifman (2013) explains that through selection and diffusion, memes have become shared social phenomena that can broaden democratic possibilities. As Mina (2019) posits, memes have become a powerful tool for sharing diverse opinions and views in democratic societies. Memes remain a crucial way to deliver political messages because of their liveliness, brevity, clarity, precision, and ability to augment media manipulation (Zabolnova, 2022). Politicians use memes as a form of impression management, to develop a public persona, shape public opinion, push ideologies and conspiracy theories, promote political ideas, and traduce their opponents (Bauckhage, 2011). For example, Donovan et al. (2022) reveal that during the 2020 U.S. election, Trump and his followers weaponized the MAGA meme and the hashtag #StopTheSteal to incite violence and disunity among

voters and politicians as a strategy intended to undermine Trump’s presidential rival, Joe Biden (Zompetti, 2025).

In the political landscape, memes occur in social media messaging, political discussions, and popular news. They are purposefully strategic and shape political discourse and public opinion (Leskovec et al., 2009; Zobotnova, 2022). Beyond that, memes typically emerge during or immediately following a cultural or political episode that becomes central to a society’s conversation in that moment in time (Mattingly, 2014; Zobotnova, 2022). This temporal consideration underscores one of the unique attributes that memes provide during periods of divisive discourse (Zompetti, 2018)—also known as *kairos*², a time-dependent yet unanticipated event, can contribute to and reveal key cultural influences for any degree of contextualization. As we shall see, Tilapia’s “*sika mmpe dede*” memes (“money does not like noise”) hinge on Ghana’s political-economic conjuncture. Quite simply, *sika mmpe dede* would be gibberish without nuanced reflection, devoid of meaning without a contextual anchor.

Similarly, memes have been strategized to undermine political candidates and their policies through propaganda and disinformation (Donovan et al., 2022; Freelon & Karpf, 2015; Gadjanova et al., 2022). By building upon previous cultural messages, memes provide a sophisticated form of meaning-making and dissemination, mainly because their intertextual nature allows linguistically connecting multiple concepts to synergistically illustrate an important, often refined, idea (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Moreover, Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) note that political memes may shift from strategic political messages to common, irrelevant, and obsolete memes after some time has elapsed and while other issues of interest and salience take over the conversation *du jour*.

Humor is often an indication of a feeling of superiority – adequacy at the expense of others, or a mockery of the inadequacies of others (Gruner, 2017; Zillmann, 1983). In this way, humor can be deployed as a form of ridicule and acknowledgement of the absurd, both of which potentially cast the subject of the meme into a politically damaging spectacle (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017; Harper, 2011). Ultimately, Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992)

² *Kairos* is a multifaceted concept in rhetoric, generally understood as “opportune time.” It may also signify considerations of appropriateness, strategic advantage, sustained sacred moments, decision-making, nonverbal communication, and persuasive discourse. The concept transcends mere temporality, encompassing a deeper understanding of the qualitative aspects of time and situation in rhetoric (Umar Farouq & Pa, 2021; Sullivan, 2023).

summarize the utility of humor as a specific tool depending on the context. These functions, as well as the other aspects mentioned above, are essential when discussing memes, since most meme research identifies humor as a central component to its function (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Kobierecki, 2014; Mina, 2019; and Shifman, 2012). Studies of memes mainly conclude that memes are mostly satirical and introduce “biting social commentary” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). As a result, Shifman (2012) classifies memetic humor into three attributes: playfulness (where major characters in the meme are humorous), incongruity (the comic is derived from two incongruent elements like a pun or irony), and superiority (a situation whereby characters in the meme are unintentionally funny). As we shall see, these criteria will be helpful when considering memes in political contexts.

African cartoon memes

The emergence of new media and online spaces has created an avenue for cartoonists to find new modes of engagement that can avoid censorship (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). Many cartoonists across the African continent have vibrant websites, homepages, and interactive platforms, including burgeoning interactive webographies, like *africacartoons.com* (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). Online visual spaces such as Facebook, YouTube, X, TikTok, and blogs are exploited by African cartoonists to push their satirical art (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). Moreover, as the most used platform in Africa, particularly in West Africa, WhatsApp has become a trove for political memes (Fisher et al., 2023; Kasirye, 2019; Mukhongo, 2020). Overall, the dynamic shift to online engagement has catalyzed a growing movement of cartoonists to engage with local-level civic politics and burning issues of the day (Wyk, 2011).

African cartoons are predominantly satirical political (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). While most political cartoonists draw attention by mocking excesses of power, they also supply historical context of the political climate of a given period (Jimoh, 2010). African cartoonists employ literary devices such as pun, irony, incongruence, hyperbole, ignorance, and satire to make us laugh and lampoon political power while balancing the spheres of art and politics in playful and serious ways (Fiankor et al., 2017; Limb & Olaniyan, 2018).

Olaoluwa (2009) argues that laughter is often mobilized for social criticism that can amuse and energize political engagement.³

Memes in Ghanaian Social Media

Jallow (2014) argues that Ghanaian memes have been premised on purely political and ideological perspectives since their inception. Cartoonists like Kwame Boakye, also known as *Ghanatta*, used their art to promote Nkrumah's⁴ ideologies and push for his overthrow during the coup in 1966. When colonialism ended in Ghana, some comic artists joined Nkrumah's crusade against neocolonialism by pushing ideologies like Pan-Africanism⁵, *Nkrumahism*⁶, and the United States of Africa (Jallow, 2014). Since independence, Ghanaian political memes have been popular and effective depending on the historical moment (Oduro-Frimpong, 2018). In our current context, Oduro-Frimpong (2018) and Fiankor et al. (2017) describe Ghanaian memes as critical entertainment and resistance. Both studies explain that beyond their humorous nature, Ghanaian animated caricatures – i.e., “memes” – articulate and reflect divergent viewpoints on a wide range of national issues. These cartoons also offer unique criticism that elicits rapid and widespread responses regarding the prominent issues they emphasize, encouraging comments and dialogue.

Specific memes are contextualized within a larger, socio-political landscape and often employ local communicative aesthetics like popular jokes, pidgin, and regional dialects to enhance meaning-making while keeping audiences amused (Fiankor et al., 2017; Oduro-Frimpong, 2018, 2021). Furthermore, the thematic approach to creating Ghanaian cartoon memes enables the examination of unequal power relations and modes of resistance between government institutions and citizens (Oduro-Frimpong, 2018). Famous cartoonists like Anadan, the Black Narrator, Makavelli, Daavi, Akosua, and Tilapia expose and criticize societal blunders by using comic caricatures on issues like corruption, religion, sanitation, and political ineptitude (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018; Oduro-Frimpong, 2018, 2021). Although political memes play a role in preserving and

³ See also Rea (2013).

⁴ Nkrumah, formally known as Kwame Nkrumah was a leading figure in the Pan-African movement and Ghana's first prime minister and president after he led the country to independence from British rule in 1957.

⁵ Pan-Africanism is an indigenous African ideology that advocates for African unity and solidarity as a counter-hegemonic apparatus to dismantle colonization (Geiss, 1967).

⁶ *Nkrumahism* is a political ideology based on the ideas and principles of Kwame Nkrumah. *Nkrumahism* emphasizes the unity of Africa, economic self-sufficiency, socialism, and anti-imperialism (Nkrumah, 1963, 1964).

documenting significant Ghanaian political events (Fiankor et al., 2017), and “...because they offer a variety of affective frames, terministic relations, and narratives around the leaks, these memes open the democratic space around the controversy. Memes create the space for multiple perspectives by incongruities” (Carter, 2016, p. 192).

“Tilapia Da Cartoonist” and Ghanaian Meme Creators

While scholarship on African memes – and in general – remains inchoate (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018), their scope, ease, speed of spreading, and influence over political messaging require more comprehensive and rigorous analysis. Regrettably, Ghanaian meme scholarship has received only minor exploration, especially regarding the documentation of contemporary meme creators and their artistic, political, and social impacts in both mass and social media. Despite how Ghanaian meme creators participate in setting agendas and facilitating public discourse, their involvement has only superficially been interrogated (Flamenbaum, 2022). Nevertheless, we do know this much: Ghanaian artists infuse their political messages with a type of “comic relief,” which simultaneously carves out unique areas where key political issues receive targeted exposure, yet their influence remains constrained, if not muted, by mediating their overall impact as they are carefully and purposefully exposed. Hence, when memes are not humorously targeting political absurdities, they can ignite or perpetuate political polarization (Galip, 2023).

It is essential to remember that while most Ghanaian meme artists are well-established in print media, their social media presence is not very significant, except in the case of Tilapia. Thus, studying his work automatically underscores its value, and it only makes sense that we closely analyze his work. Indeed, Tilapia represents a unique figure in African political discourse, as he characterizes himself as someone with the “ability to communicate and illustrate trending issues in a satirical way through visuals” (Haruna, 2024). Although Tilapia’s works illustrate political and social cartoons that are constantly featured on *TV3 Ghana* (television channel) and its online portal, *3News.com*, he currently has over 600 posts and 15.2K followers on Instagram, over 400 posts, 76K likes, and 85K followers on Facebook, 23.2K followers on Twitter/X and more recently, 446.7k followers and 3M Likes on Tik Tok under the *TV3 Ghana* Tik Tok account. Following his ability to communicate and illustrate trending issues using satire

powerfully, Tilapia Da Cartoonist has become a household name in Ghana and is increasingly more known regionally and globally. In addition to his graphic drawings, the artist doubles as an animator (Jemima, 2023). Tilapia received the Ghana Leadership Award for Best Political Cartoonist in 2020 and was named the Best Comedy Sketch/Cartoon Artist the same year by the Comedy and Poetry Awards Ghana (Jemima, 2023). According to Oduro-Frimpong (2021), Tilapia's works have amassed momentum and traction over the years as he uses social media to reach out to his audience in and around Ghana.

Given Tilapia's growing online presence, we must explore the dynamics of online memetic engagement by contemporary artists and how their social media presence amplifies their artistic, social, and political impacts. While Tilapia and his works have been mentioned and highlighted in a few scholarly works (e.g., Aikins & Akoi-Jackson, 2020; Alhassan, 2022; Mpotsiah, 2022), only one study (Elewosi et al., 2023) has specifically examined the rhetorical nature of some of his cartoon memes. Thus, we investigate the factors contributing to Tilapia's memetic impact by examining his rhetorical strategies and techniques. We hope to reveal some reasons for his popularity and note how his operations can foster or support social change efforts.

ANALYZING GHANAIAN MEMES AS POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Because we are curious about the relationship between memes and rhetorical techniques (such as satire), we chose to critically analyze Ghanaian memetic discourse during a presidential campaign, exemplified by one of Ghana's leading political and social critics. Consequently, we will employ two rhetorical schemas – satirical criticism and perspective by incongruity – to analyze three of Tilapia's popular memes. Tilapia created these memes within the last three months of 2022, a *kairotic* moment during the peak of Ghana's inflation crisis, to respond to the president's ideas on resolving the economic quandary. As such, we will explore how particular rhetorical themes reveal how Tilapia purposefully framed art as potent symbolism that challenged the president's pious and righteous rhetoric during his first public address covering the financial calamity, accentuating the economic implications of the situation, and augmenting public sentiments.

Satirical Criticism

As a rhetorical strategy, satire seeks to wittingly provoke an emotional and intellectual reaction in an audience concerning a matter of public significance (Phiddian, 2013). Satire should stimulate critical thought, challenge established ideas, and focus attention on social issues that may be overlooked or ignored (Phiddian, 2013). As a rhetorical and figurative (non-literal) method, satire employs irony, paradox, caricature, absurdity, juxtaposition, exaggeration, and ridicule to expose and criticize flaws or shortcomings in a particular subject or issue (Nwezeh, 1982; Phiddian, 2013). Along these lines, Rotman et al. (1977) conceptualize this form of criticism as a “species of parody, burlesque, caricature ...on some low theme of sportive humor, which exposes only what is absurd, awkward and ridiculous ... in style, manner, taste and sentiment of a writer” (p. 85-86).

Given that Africa is commonly plagued with greed, corruption, violence, and poor governance (Ataribanam, 2024; Matebese, 2024), most African authors and cartoonists assume the role of a regime watchdog who can wield, among other things, the powerful weapon of satire to challenge, check, and – if necessary – overturn the existing order (Nwezeh, 1982). Present-day African memes reflect quotidian issues, crises, and other significant political concerns (Willems, 2011). Contemporary political cartoonists draw attention by mocking the excesses and abuses of power (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). In West Africa, these artists often deploy their work to challenge politicians, whose socio-political foibles are ridiculed (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018; Nwezeh, 1982). For example, a satirical critique might portray political figures as a cartoonish version of themselves, exaggerating their flaws and shortcomings to make a point (Oduro-Frimpong, 2018). Oduro-Frimpong (2018) describes the work of one of Ghana’s prominent cartoonists, the Black Narrator, as a form of critical entertainment while accentuating corruption's prevalence in the Ghanaian government. He describes these cartoons as socially democratic modes of expression, allowing divergent perspectives.

By interrogating Tilapia’s memes, we will explore his unique use of satire to contribute to the overarching watchdog role in Ghanaian democracy. Beyond that, we will feature the characteristics of his works that inspire uniqueness and the practical ways these cartoons powerfully challenge hegemonic discourses, reflect issues of public interest,

build resonance with audiences, and incentivize engagements and discussions on his social media platforms.

Burke’s “Perspective by Incongruity”

Interestingly, Kenneth Burke’s (1965) perspective of incongruity is a rhetorical tool that can enhance our appreciation of Ghanaian memes. This concept emphasizes the use of contradictory elements in a situation or statement to humorously spotlight the absurdity or overlooked aspects of the phenomenon. The goal is to enrich our understanding, challenge our expectations, provoke thought, and illustrate the preposterousness of and contradictions in everyday life, making them more noticeable. As such, perspective by incongruity is employed to analyze socially contextualized ideologies and norms through juxtaposition of symbols that influence the audience, offering the opportunity to challenge their traditional ways of thinking with new perspectives (Adjei, 2018; Ciurel, 2020). Burke (1965) describes this process as “gauging situations by verbal ‘atom cracking’ – a word belongs by custom to a certain category, and by rational planning, you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category” (p. 308). Burke aimed to equip audiences with interpretive tools to resist stereotypical and hegemonic messages designed by various manipulative persuaders (Ciurel, 2020).

When a new moment is confronted with our previously established views, a new and incongruent way of thinking can emerge; then, our perceptions of the past, present, and future can undergo a shift. On one hand, we may see words in proximity to each other producing a confusing, perhaps even contradictory, relationship. On the other hand, the word placement can also reveal a different dynamic, where the positioning generates a previously unimaginable meaning (Adjei, 2018). The aim is to extend the use of a key term or concept by removing it from its original context and placing it in another situation, opening different standpoints and expanding the audience's vision of media messages (Ciurel, 2020).

Perspective by incongruity as a rhetorical tool challenges the rhetorical pieties that symbolically denigrate those who do not look or act like us and, by so doing, creates new possibilities for developing different perspectives (Adjei, 2018). Negative depictions of others require us to scapegoat them as a specific group. In contrast, piety is “a sense of what properly goes with what, an unforeseen force that forms the basis for the

construction of our beliefs” and “extends through all the texture of our lives but has been concealed from us because we think we are so thoroughly without religion and think that ‘pious process’ is confined to the sphere of churchliness” (Burke, 1984, p.74). By understanding piety in this manner, our ways of conceptualizing and representing ourselves *vis-à-vis* others are not limited to religious matters, but, instead, actually encapsulate all facets of our symbolic reality. Given that the need for order is threatened when an incongruent situation affects piety, incongruity serves as a covert and implicit strategy for challenging pieties by interweavingly refashioning our realities. Simply put is placing two words or concepts together that generally would not mean anything worthwhile. Yet, their placement or proximity yields new perspectives so that new possibilities or ways of seeing can emerge.

In our analysis, we dissect and explore the incongruent perspectives projected by Tilapia in his prominent memes that debunk the popular phrase, “*sika mmpe dede*” (“money does not like noise”). As we shall see, this positioning was essentially the principal discursive strategy in the president’s first public address on the economic crisis. By viewing “*sika mmpe dede*” as a contextual ideological utterance – similarly to what Jameson (1981) labels an “ideologeme,” or McGee’s (1980) “ideograph”⁷ – we will reveal how Tilapia’s memes expose and satirically challenge the president’s notions of public silence and inaction as opposed to collective agitation or public unrest (Chibber, 2010; White, 1987).

ANALYSIS

In this section, we analyze three of Tilapia’s popular memes about the growing economic crisis in Ghana. Specifically, the analysis will capture the context of events that inspired the artist’s creation, engage in a visual analysis of each meme, and expose how each meme achieves its purpose of undermining “*sika me dede*” as a persuasive ideology in each social context.

“*Sika mmpe dede*” and Its Social Context

Between 2020 and 2023, the Ghanaian economy recorded its lowest ever currency depreciation with approximately a 265 % plunge, especially compared to the U.S. dollar

⁷ We are grateful to Cem Addemir (2023) who points out this connection.

(Amoh, 2021; Zubairu et al., 2024). Despite a couple of aberrant years that showed meager signs of growth, the Ghanaian cedi depreciated at 12.9 % in 2019, then to 3.9% in 2020, and during the last quarter of 2021, it bottomed at 1.7%, which is the lowest depreciation in nearly three decades (Amoh, 2021). Consequently, the drastic cedi depreciation ignited an increase in inflation and an overall economic downturn. According to *Ghana News Agency* (2023), the inflation rate accelerated from 50.3% to 54.1% between November and December 2022. As of March 2023, inflation stood at 45% (Ghana Statistical Services, 2023) compared to 5% in the United States (Trading Economics, 2023). To put this in context, the value of the Ghanaian cedi is 40% less than that of the American dollar. This means that the price of a commodity in Ghana will be nearly 40% higher than the same commodity sold in the United States. This suggests that currency devaluation risks higher inflation and unemployment rates, weaker trade relations, and poor credit ratings (Agénor, 1998; Svirskyi & Melykh, 2017; Valogo et al., 2023).

Addressing the nation about the inflation crisis on Sunday, October 30, 2022, the president, His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwah Akufo-Addo, stated that speaking negatively about the local currency accounted for the recent cedi depreciation, the high inflation rate, and the overall economic crisis (Donkor, 2022). The president emphasized in the Akan local dialect⁸ that complaining about the dismal economy creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. By discussing the negative implications of the economy, citizens are much more likely to see and experience those implications. By using the Akan phrase – “*sika mmpe dede*,” which is an indigenous aphorism that normalizes the concept of “money does not like noise” – Akufo-Addo attempted to dissuade citizens from focusing on the economic blight by highlighting and discussing the positive elements of society that Ghanaians were experiencing. He added,

...Where there is chaos, where there is noise, where there is unrest, you will not find money...Money doesn't like noise. If you talk down your currency, it will go down. If you allow others to talk down your currency, it will go down... (Nartey, 2022).

Despite the president's assertion that the negative attitudes of the citizenry are the reasons for Ghana's poor economic performance, the reality of what contributes – over time – to currency depreciation along with concomitant economic precarity is antithetical

⁸ One of our authors speaks Akan fluently and provided needed translations.

to the president's conjecture: "Devaluation is caused by economic fundamentals, interest rate differentials, political instability, or investor risk aversion" (Zubairu et al., 2024, p.18). Essentially, the idea is that citizens should be serious and avoid distractions when speaking about financial matters. Donkor (2022) explains that the "*sika mmpe dede*" comment instantly became a prominent social media phenomenon, particularly on Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Twitter/X platforms. After this quote achieved virality, Tilapia responded, almost in a music-like counterpoint, during this precise, *kairotic* moment to counter the distraction, to emphasize the profound economic implications of the crisis, and to dismantle the pious belief exemplified by the underlying meaning of the president's epigrammatic statement.

The "*sika mmpe dede*" quote became manifest in viral tweets, hashtags, inside jokes, humorous songs, and comical memes on social media. By directing one's feelings on social media platforms, users participated in passive resistance (Gainous et al., 2021; Pagani et al., 2011). However, even if social media users are docile, we should remember that a large percentage of the population was apathetic before the advent of the internet. Additionally, for many people – especially young people – accessing online information is the primary, if not the only, way they receive political news (Lemaire, 2023a, 2023b; Leppert & Matsa, 2024). The most recent data reveal that Ghanaian internet penetration is nearly 70% of the population and growing rapidly (Kemp, 2024). As netizens continue to scour the internet for items of interest, they will likely be exposed to some level of political knowledge that can strengthen sensibilities toward divisive issues (Rotman et al., 2011; Zompetti, 2018). As such, passive social media use might be a hopeful way to "get one's foot in the door" (Goldsborough, 2011; Rotman et al., 2011). Of course, if users find something useful or interesting, they may be encouraged to click hyperlinks that direct them to additional information (Zohouri et al., 2020).

Mina (2019) affirms that memes have become one avenue for people to make light of concerning issues affecting their daily lives. Thus, given the Ghanaian populace's predictive nature of online behavior, we should expect, as does President Akufo-Addo, that they will respond to a major national crisis, such as the economic downturn, in trivializing and humorous ways. For instance, the president employs his usual witty discursive strategy to quell the public agitation that occurred because of the financial crisis and to

distract any critical attention or scrutiny that could subsequently follow his address. By stating, “Where there is chaos, where there is noise, where there is unrest, you will not find money...Money doesn’t like noise (*sika mmpe dede*) ...,” the president intentionally encourages a subdued public attitude as an ideal way to combat the crisis while also openly condemning any forms of public dissent. The president’s message discouraging negative and aggressive public resistance allows him to conceal his more important purpose of diverting the critical attention that otherwise would have been attached to the president’s handling of the economic turmoil. Therefore, the president can rhetorically distract the electorate from the crisis because the ideology behind “*sika mmpe dede*” is a state of calmness, that is, dormancy and triviality, which allows the president to maneuver around the crisis that his ineptitude, at least in part, created.

Tilapia’s Memes about “Sika mmpe dede”



Figure 1. “Opana’s Shop” Meme. The meme highlights and critiques the double standard of living between the Ghanaian citizenry and the government.

This meme [fig. 1] depicts a shop scene where the president of Ghana is portrayed as the shop owner. The shop displays an uneven quantity of provisional food items, including cans of tomato paste and two different-sized gallons of oil on a counter. The bigger gallon is labeled “ELEPHANT SIZE GOV’T OIL,” with a picture of the Ghana Coat of Arms and an elephant (the symbol of the National People’s Party⁹). The smaller gallon’s label is hidden behind the president’s comment, “*sika mmpe dede*.” The shop is labeled

⁹ The National People’s Party (NPP) is the current ruling political party serving the term from 2016 to 2024.

“OPANA’S SHOP” and bears a sticker that reads “ALL PRICES REMAIN THE SAME.” In this illustration, President Akufo-Addo is portrayed as a big-headed character with a conceited smirk. The meme bears the *3News* Agency logo and Tilapia’s signature.

This meme provides an impious perspective on the president’s haphazard rhetoric. It emphasizes one of the absurdities that account for the current economic catastrophe. Elsewhere, while viral jokes, songs, and funny memes of “*sika mmpe dede*” divert serious and critical attention from the root causes and perpetrators of the crisis, this meme exposes them. Adjei (2018) posits that “the need for order,” in this case, the imposed state of irreverence as “*sika mmpe dede*” suggests, is challenged when incongruity is implicitly employed to recreate realities and to enable critical interpretations from the audience. The display of an uneven number of provisional items in the president’s shop, as depicted in the cartoon, features a counter-realistic perspective on the current economic crisis, where there is an unequal distribution of and access to national resources and standards of living between the government and the citizenry. By dialectically framing the sizes of the different provisions (the higher quantity of provisions is labeled for government use), the meme exaggerates the symbolic value of resources to reveal the ridiculous and disparate nature of the rich-poor gap.

This depiction is intended to reflect the existing unequal standard of living between the government and the citizens. It unveils Ghanaians' economic hardship amidst the financial calamity, especially when elites are perceived to be obnoxiously ostentatious. Marginalized groups in the citizenry naturally feel betrayed, oppressed, and victimized. Tilapia juxtaposes these two realities: the comfortable situation experienced by government officials and the economically unbearable lives of citizens, to rupture the piety of “*sika mmpe dede*.” The two realities debunk the idea that “ALL PRICES REMAIN THE SAME” and expose how government officials are financially immune to the economic hardships the rest of the country faces. When Tilapia highlights the level of inequality between government elites and citizens, he elicits an emotional and logical provocation to encourage the rejection of the pious belief embedded in “*sika mmpe dede*.” However, instead of remaining calm and joking about the popular quote, the realities depicted in the meme are intended to invite its audiences to adopt a serious and critical response to the economic situation and to encourage dissent against the government’s tone-deaf response

to the financial fiasco. Using humor in this way – as a lure or a hook to include with and connect to particular audiences – exemplifies how memes characterize “playfulness in language,” which also suggests how we can adopt levity as a way to encourage and inspire fellow citizens to reflect on serious matters (Shifman, 2012).

The satirical emphasis made in this meme cannot be overstated. Tilapia employs caricature by exaggerating and distorting some physical features of the president. In the meme, the president is depicted with a big head, a smile, and his infamous spectacles that amplify the resemblance of the caricature with the “real” president. This distortion is intended to ridicule his character and undermine his credibility by portraying him as a comical, laughable, insensitive, and conceited buffoon. Indeed, the distorted depiction of the president’s head connotes a “larger than life” image that draws attention to the absurd caricature and underscores the notion that the government is “always watching” by looming over our mundane, routinized behaviors. The president’s portrait evokes laughter and downplays the perceived credibility of his posture and words, both in the meme and in real life. The president’s intended wit, “*sika mmpe dede*” in his public address, is satirically weaponized to undermine his authenticity in the meme (Nwezeh, 1982). Shifman (2012) states that one of the persuasive components of a meme is the appearance of superiority. In this case, the arrogance depicted in the president’s facial characteristics highlights his apathy—or unwillingness—to tackle the economic crisis and his ambivalence toward citizens, almost as if such duties are beneath him. The goal is to project the president, and by extension the government, as a foe to the country (Adjei, 2018).

By creating a foe and folly of the president, Tilapia depicts the government as dispassionate and insensitive to the citizens, as well as the perpetrator behind the overall inequality and economic havoc endured by the populace. Additionally, Tilapia addresses the president as “*opana*,” an informal and colloquial term in Ghanaian urban vernacular, often used to mock and name ridiculous personalities indirectly. This technique allows the artist’s audience to build resonance and familiarity with a common cultural act of discreetly naming and shaming people in places of power. Moreover, this contextualization enhances meaning-making while keeping the audience amused (Fiankor et al., 2017; Oduro-Frimpong, 2018, 2021). Finally, given that others have used “*Opana*” to refer to

their informal “buddy” – in this case, President Akufo-Addo – Tilapia is drawing from contemporary popular culture to reinforce his derision of the president (Mensah, 2018).

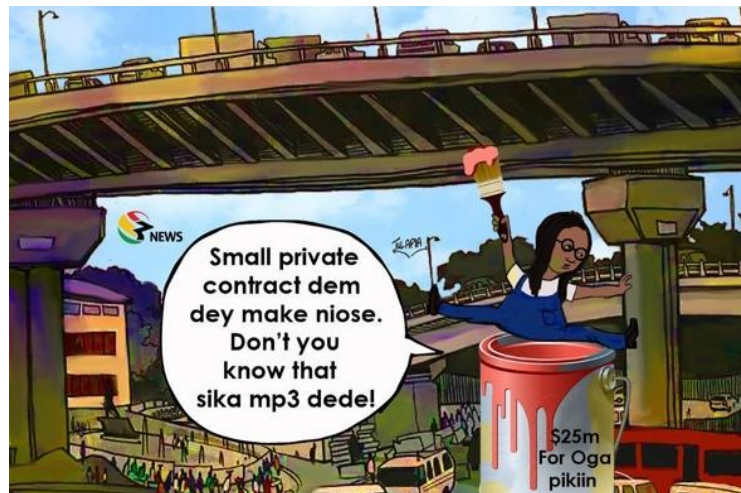


Figure 2. The Private Contract Meme. This meme references the alleged fraudulent deal awarded to the president’s daughter, Gyankroma.

In another example of a Tilapian meme, a cartoon image shows the daughter of President Akufo-Addo, Gyankroma, leaping over a large can of peach-colored paint, attempting to paint a bridge in a public space [fig. 2]. She comments, “Small private contract dem dey make noise. Don’t you know that *sika mmpe dede!*” The paint can is inscribed with, “\$25m For Oga pikiin,” which translates to twenty-five million dollars for the boss’ child. The cartoon bears Tilapia’s signature and the *3News* logo.

The situational context of this meme is drawn from an event that made headlines in November 2022, amidst the inflation and depreciation crisis. Following a painting contract awarded to Gyankroma, critics of the president levied allegations concerning the amount, as it implied that Gyankroma, as the president’s daughter, enjoyed special consideration. According to Nyavor (2022), Gyankroma denied allegations of a \$25 million contract from the state to beautify some interchanges in Accra¹⁰. Nyavor (2022) reports that the claim was first made by media personality Kevin Taylor, on October 26 on his “Loud Silence” platform; but it has since been republished with other media outlets. In an interview at *Joy FM*, Gyankroma stated, “It’s a project spearheaded by the Creative Arts Agency, and its aim is simple; to transform major public spaces and monumental sites for all”

¹⁰ Accra is the capital city of Ghana, located in the capital region, Greater-Accra Region.

(Arhinful, 2022). According to Yamoah (2022) from *MyJoyOnline*,¹¹ the CEO of a Creative Arts Agency, Gyankroma Akufo-Addo, said more designs should be expected.

While there has been no evidence to support this widespread allegation, the suspicion of possible government disbursement of outrageous amounts of public funds to the president's daughter amplified the already growing mass agitation ignited by the economic predicament; the implication, of course, was that Gyankroma was profiting from public funds while the rest of the country struggled over basic needs, like food. The meme specifically reflects popular sentiments toward the daughter's private contract and the ambiguity of facts surrounding its cost in a satirical way. Mina (2014) notes how social change memes, like this one, can capture popular sentiments and provide avenues for communities to dialogue about issues of public interest.

This meme portrays Gyankroma as a tiny woman who leaps over a massive can of paint with a brush in her left hand. Her right hand rests on one pillar under the bridge as she attempts to paint it. Despite her petite figure, her acrobatic leap over the giant can of expensive paint is intended to humorously highlight her bewildering incompetence instead of the outrageous amount of money (for a can of paint!) that subsidizes her bridge murals. The suggestion of corruption is more notable when we consider how the image of Gyankroma closely resembles the image of her father, including tiny details, as exemplified by both characters wearing the same eyeglasses. To discredit Gyankroma, just as he did with the president, Tilapia attributes the popular quote made by her father to the daughter's expression. In the meme, Gyankroma asserts that, "Small private contract dem dey make noise. Don't you know that *sika mmpe dede!*" which suggests that it is absurd for Ghanaians to be agitated over a "low-cost" contract while knowing very well that agitation would not yield any productive result to the economic crisis. This form of identification – placing Gyankroma's character with her father as a foe – refutes her denial of any corruption or malfeasance in her awarded contract (Nwezeh, 1982).

Furthermore, this technique underscores the alleged corruption surrounding Gyankroma and her painting contract. Tilapia projects the undeniable ambivalence and

¹¹ *MyJoyOnline* is a Ghanaian news website that provides comprehensive news coverage in Ghana and other African countries. It is known for its independent, fearless, and credible journalism. It is also the winner of the CIMG "Online News Portal of the Year" award during two consecutive years (MyJoyOnline, 2023). MyJoyOnline is also ranked as one of the most popular news sources in Ghana, with at least 2.4 million visits to its website each month, as of February 2025 (similarweb, 2025).

disregard the government has for the citizens suffering from the unbearable pecuniary predicament, as the government continues to embezzle public funds instead of channeling money to ameliorate the social misery experienced by the citizenry. In this way, Tilapia's artwork reinforces the *raison d'être* of memes – to ridicule, mock, and provide social commentary regarding scandals, corruption, and other political realities (Kobierecki, 2014).

By renaming Gyankroma on the gas of paint as “*oga pikiin*,” which translates to “the boss’ child,” Tilapia discreetly employs another Ghanaian urban term to shame and label the painter publicly. The integration of such locally inspired linguistic aesthetics in the form of pidgin or urban vernacular (Fiankor et al., 2017) enhances audience understanding while keeping them amused at the same time (Oduro-Frimpong, 2018, 2021). Essentially, in the spirit of Shiman's (2012) meme schema, we can connect the “seriousness” of the message *content* with the *form* of “playfulness” that emerges from the meme's satire. The satirically humorous nature of the meme and its message, as contextualized by economic deterioration, names and ridicules perpetrators of the crisis while stimulating audience emotions and agitation to abandon the pious propaganda propagated through “*sika mmpe dede*.” Indeed, incorporating an indigenous aphorism not only underscores the significance of the meme but also reflects a specific tactic to resonate with the typical Ghanaian citizen (Amoako, 1992). In this way, the meme also seeks governmental accountability and action toward curbing the overarching inflation quandary. Meyer (2000) describes this satirical role of humor as a type of “enforcement.” Tilapia uses this enforcement strategy to attack and criticize Gyankroma, her father (the president), and by extension, the government, while holding them accountable for the financial instability.



Figure 3. The 1983 Hunger Meme. The meme alludes to the 1983 hunger crisis in Ghana as an impending recurrence under the current government’s economic mismanagement.

This meme [fig. 3] depicts a gloomy scene where two emaciated and impoverished children look at a brown sack labeled “FOOD PRICE,” hanging above them, far from their reach. One of the children is seen on a ladder with his hand stretched out, carrying an empty bowl toward the sack, but unsuccessfully reaching it because the ladder is too short. The scene has a green signpost with the caption, “*sika mmpe dede*,” and the bold inscription, “1983 HUNGER RELOADED,” an obvious allusion to the 1983 drought that devastated Ghana. *3News* logo and Tilapia’s signature are embedded in the cartoon.

In this meme, Tilapia employs powerful imagery to highlight extreme poverty, hunger, and hardship by alluding to a well-known historical event in Ghana – the 1983 hunger crisis. The catastrophic ordeal was a severe food shortage that affected millions nationwide. The crisis was attributed to drought, economic mismanagement, and political instability (Ray, 1987). The government’s economic measures, including currency devaluation and reduced agricultural subsidies, decreased food production, which was worsened by drought (Ray, 1987). Consequently, food prices surged, making it difficult for many to afford essentials. The Ghanaian government declared a state of emergency and sought international aid (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). Humanitarian organizations and foreign governments assisted, but recovery took several years (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000).

By alluding to this historically devastating moment, the artist provides vivid imagery of Ghanaians' economic hardships, including the high cost of living, extreme currency depreciation, high cost of food, utilities, and other necessities. The 1983 reference reflects public anxiety about the possibility of another impending hunger crisis. The evocative imagery is satirically juxtaposed with the conveyed piety embodied by the popular phrase, “*sika mmpe dede*.” Tilapia employs this technique to heighten the audience’s emotional response to, or engagement with, this meme by recalling a historically familiar and traumatizing event that could occur again. The prediction of another hunger crisis or, at the very least, its daunting comparison to the current economic predicament, propels the audience to anxiously abandon the pious belief that less agitation and triviality of the crisis in a comically “*sika mmpe dede*” manner would bring anticipated change. The meme powerfully evokes fear of an imminent hunger crisis that calls for a more serious, systematic, and productively aggressive response from its readers and the government. Naturally, images of starving children do not fit Shifman’s (2012) schema of humorous – or “playful” – memes. However, the contrasting images with knowledge of elite power and their culpability for the crisis suggest that positioning the pictures with text can produce a startling rupture for possible dialogue and social change (Machirori, 2023). Overall, the depiction of the two emaciated children triggers a fear of a possible hunger crisis that would target the most vulnerable groups, like children. Of course, imagining one’s children deteriorating or possibly dying of hunger is a powerful motivation to fight for change aggressively.

DISCUSSION

Placing Tilapia’s “*sika mmpe dede*” memes under a close analytical lens reveals the artist’s provocative use of satire to combat socio-political issues in Ghana. As such, Tilapia effectively employs satirical techniques, including caricature, allusion, imagery, and incongruity, to amuse his audience and to keep them engaged and critically aware. The artist constructively challenges dominant political discourse while balancing art and politics in playful but serious ways (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). He positions humor and laughter as social criticism (Olaoluwa, 2009) and mobilizes his audience (Ghanaian masses) to participate actively in Ghana’s democracy. Tilapia’s works can be considered

“social change” memes because they seek to drive cultural and political reform through mass participation, which powerfully articulates dissent rhetoric over broadcast and social media (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Mina, 2014, 2019). With such growing levels of online meme culture and activism, we can anticipate how the democratic impact and influence of Tilapia’s works might crescendo over time (Kraidy, 2017). Shifman (2013) agrees that meme engagement as an uprising social phenomenon can broaden democratic possibilities, especially since information flows are no longer unidirectional from elites.

Tilapia’s fame in the cartoon world and on social media can be attributed to his distinctive ability as an artist to go beyond highlighting socio-political crises in his works and accurately reflect widely held convictions of the populace while creating avenues for constructive criticism (Jallow, 2014). We argue that Tilapia’s online engagements have gradually paved the way for constructing a form of online memetic subculture. While Tilapia’s works have become the artistic and discursive vehicle through which he and his audience generate meanings, they also provide avenues for this movement to express their resistance to dominant cultural norms and values (Hebdige, 1979). This process of meaning formation is how this memetic subculture uniquely functions rhetorically (Kraidy, 2017). Indeed, as Flamenbaum suggests, “social actors are doing semiotic heavy lifting by producing and reproducing meaning in the same way that language transforms through time in the mouths of speakers. 220).

As the leader or “outsider” of a segment of the Ghanaian populace, Tilapia capitalizes on the participatory nature of social media and web-based technology to influence his audience to fight ideological battles against the government and other elites, while empowering them to be nonconforming and freethinkers in an ideological struggle that happens during a contextualized moment (Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Donovan et al., 2022; Gee, 2004; Wong et al., 2021). Tilapia’s growing fan base online can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that his memes continue to resonate and reflect popular sentiments, thereby persuading (and galvanizing) more people into his meme movement. The artist incentivizes his followers to challenge the status quo and ignites open-space conversations that could potentially coordinate online and real-life action in protests and civil disobedience (Donovan et al., 2022; Kraidy, 2017; Mina, 2019). Additionally, while some cartoons may exaggerate or inaccurately reflect societal issues, Tilapia’s works are

drawn from credible and accurate sources, including daily headlines, news items, personal experiences, and historical events (Limb & Olaniyan, 2018). In effect, it is arguable that his *ethos* significantly accounts for his popularity and the perceived credibility associated with his works.

Tilapia's use of situational timing, or *kairos*, is another powerful rhetorical strategy. For example, following the president's distractive public speech and a series of alleged collusive government deals, Tilapia published his counter "*sika mmpe dede*" memes. The "*sika mmpe dede*" situation generated heightened public attention. Before the president's public address, Ghanaians were agitated and frenzied. The country was in a state of unrest, with tension mounting as each day brought increasing prices of goods and living standards (Ofori-Atta, 2013). With such a deteriorating state of the economy, there could have been a general fear of an impending hunger crisis, especially given the country's history with similar tragedies. Knowing this, the president launched his "*sika mmpe dede*" discursive strategy to suppress public agitation, and successfully so. Since the president's rhetoric provided an effective social media buzz, most Ghanaians were distressed since the president did not offer substantive options or reassurance regarding the crisis.

Tilapia capitalized on this underlying mass frustration endured by Ghanaians to dampen the crazed attention on the economy. By releasing his works precisely during the prevailing socio-political and economic climate, Tilapia's memes maximize the *kairotic* moment, and they leverage the heightened receptivity of Ghanaians to challenge the president's "*sika mmpe dede*" ideology. The timing of these memes coincides with an opportune moment when his audience is most open to alternatives, optimizing the speed and impact of his artwork as a strategic counter-discourse (Lantz & Just, 2021; Skouen, 2023).

Another unique attribute of Tilapia's works is the effective use of communicative aesthetics like popular jokes, pidgin vocabulary, and local dialect in creating captions as part of his memes. Integrating local communicative aesthetics enhances meaning-making while amusing audiences (Amoako, 1992; Fiankor et al., 2017; Oduro-Frimpong, 2018, 2021). This indigenously distinct approach to African cartoon meme creation has been overlooked in most Western scholarly attempts to understand African rhetoric

(Flamenbaum, 2022). Therefore, Western humor and social media criticism approaches must incorporate indigenous perspectives when analyzing African texts (Amoako, 1992).

In a developing country where statistics on illiteracy are significantly high,¹² Tilapia's visual memes may be one of the few ways illiterate citizens (those who cannot read and write but heavily rely on visually engaging social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok) keep up with trending socio-political and economic issues in the country. Kobierecki (2014) emphasizes that some people do not watch the news on television or read the newspaper but gather their knowledge and politics from memes, a finding noted more recently by other scholars as well (Lemaire 2023a, 2023b; Leppert & Matsa, 2024).

Lester (2014) adds that visual journalism, including memes, is vital in disseminating news to audiences with varying literacy levels.¹³ Image-macro memes, such as Tilapia's works, are effective messages relying on unique symbols, vernacular, and imagery to make news accessible and engaging to non-literate audiences. Tilapia's use of familiar symbols, local aesthetics, and slang, like "*oga pikin*" and "*Opana*," allows his audience to quickly grasp the content and context of the news without the necessity of reading the text. Moreover, through humor and satire, Tilapia presents complex news topics in a more digestible form, making it easier for non-literate audiences to understand.

Given his enormous following on social media and other media platforms, it is not surprising that Tilapia Da Cartoonist is one of the most successful and influential cartoon artists in Ghanaian history (Sakpoli, 2025). Most of the leading cartoonists across the continent have established themselves and their famous works on vibrant websites, homepages, and interactive platforms. Tilapia is well-established and has amassed a substantial following on prominent social media platforms.¹⁴

Moreover, and more specifically, the voice of youth in Tilapia's work also seeks to encourage citizens to be change-seekers and changemakers. A meme can only make a difference when it is cleverly produced, understood, and appreciated by its target audience. African cartoon memes are increasingly becoming an integral part of democratic

¹² As of the time this paper, the recent data indicate that Ghana's literacy rate stands at 69.8%, indicating that 7.9 million Ghanaians, aged six and above, are illiterate (cannot read and write) (Ghana Statistical Services, 2021).

¹³ See also Headley et al. (2022) and Rice (2023).

¹⁴ For example, see Limb & Olaniyan (2018).

discourse and, for that reason alone, deserve critical scholarly attention (Rathi & Jain, 2024). Outstanding artists like Tilapia must be carefully examined as scholarship attempts to fathom the impact of individual memes, the significance of genres of memes, and the overall contributions memes can make to democratic discourse. In this spirit, we hope this essay adds to the conversation about the strategic use of memes in the digital media ecosystem.

Additionally, our continued discussion about the role and impact of memes can promote their utility in political discourse that citizens often perceive as confusing, if not intimidating. This study reveals the importance of Ghanaian memetics for scholarship, researchers, and enthusiasts worldwide. It demonstrates the significance of Ghanaian memetics in the larger context of meme engagement, spectacle, humor, and social media. With their reliance on various humor tactics and connections to well-known celebrities and influencers, memes can excite the populace, particularly the youth, in beneficial ways that ignite interest and underscore the relevancy of memes in various ways. Of course, we have only scratched the surface by focusing on a single memetic artist. Expanding this conversation with other artists and memes can enhance and highlight the future of social change scholarship.

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