

**"I Thought It Was a Work Event".  
British Cultural Resistance through Memes**

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**Abstract**

Social media's members of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been engaged in a variety of new forms of communication, among which, an important place is occupied by image memes. Memes represent an idea, concept, opinion and situation (López-Paredes & Carillo-Andrade 2022), incorporate diverse elements such as intertextual references, a joke or a critical message that refer to some aspect of the human experience, and are endowed with a significant discursive power (Wiggins 2019).

The purpose of this study is to examine some of the memes that were created as a reaction to "Partygate" in 2021, criticizing the British Prime Minister. A qualitative content analysis was performed on a series of memes that started from Boris Johnson's apology to the House of Commons ("I thought it was a work event") for having attended a party in a period when such gatherings were forbidden (with the exception of work events) because of Covid-19 restrictions. The study aims to depict how these memes act as a form of resistance and criticism against the British Prime Minister, his deeds and apology.

**Keywords:** *memes, humour, British, cultural resistance, work event.*

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, there have been published a series of studies dedicated to Internet memes, seen as "artifacts emblematic of digital culture" (Wiggins 2019: xvi), and a useful "tool for citizens seeking to

participate actively and discursively in a digital public sphere” (Huntington 2017a: ii).

The purpose of this study is to examine some of the memes that were created as a reaction to “Partygate” in 2021, criticizing the British Prime Minister.

The general question the paper tries to answer is:

How is the cultural resistance represented in the “work event” memes?

While finding the answer to the general question, the paper will also have in view the following aspects:

What are the sources of humour in the “work event” memes analyzed?

What roles do these memes play?

What is/are the cultural value(s) evoked by the image?

What is the relationship established between the image and the words in the context of the culture the images refer to?

In order to answer the research questions, we applied quantitative content analysis to evaluate a series of memes (parodying Boris Johnson’s apology in response to Partygate) that were posted on Twitter and which were retrieved from [knowyourmeme.com](https://knowyourmeme.com)<sup>1</sup>, [manchestereveningnews.co.uk](https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk)<sup>2</sup>, [dailymail.co.uk](https://www.dailymail.co.uk)<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Memes

From an etymological point of view, the origins of the word “meme” can be traced back to Ancient Greek, being a shortened form of the word “mimema”, meaning “something imitated” (Pavlovic 2016: 98). The word “meme” was introduced for the first time in 1976 by Richard Dawkins in his book “The Selfish Gene”, as not only a phonetic,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/partygate>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/funniest-boris-johnson-memes-after-22738854>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10398001/Memes-flooding-internet-mocking-Boris-Johnsons-claim-BYOB-party-work-event.html>

but also a cultural equivalent of the word "gene" – "as it captures the linkage between culture and memory" (Wiggins 2019: 2). He envisaged memes as cultural units that are replicated and passed on by imitation, just like genes (Dawkins 1976; 2014)

The expansion of the Internet in the last decades led to the strong association of memes with the digital society imposed by the Internet culture. They are, thus, redefined as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (Shifman 2013: 367).

An internet meme is a type of user-generated content circulating online and consisting of a series of distinct items (be they static, like images or hyperlinks, or dynamic, like animations or videos) that share a common theme and are the product of people's creativity, by means of which either a clear or a (somehow) intuitive message is conveyed. In Wiggins' terms (2019: 11), an internet meme is

[...] a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity.

Wiggins (2019: 1) elaborates on the difference between the Dawkinsian meme and the internet meme, and supports the idea (in line with Huntington, 2017b; Smith, 2007) that it is not *mimeme* but *enthymeme* that can offer the essence of internet meme, as a digital phenomenon based not only on imitation but also on a discursive argument offered or countered through both text and visual code. Through this, Wiggins emphasizes the internet memes that have "a critical component of society, politics, etc." He also considers that meme is an umbrella concept, "under which internet meme is merely an example" (2019: 14).

A meme generally displays two main elements: a visual component (an image) and a short text (that has the role to highlight, clarify or contradict the message conveyed by the image). In other words, the items that constitute a meme have three main traits: they "(a)

share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) are created with awareness of each other; and (c) are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users” (Shifman 2013: 41).

Several types of memes have been identified, and classified according to certain criteria (see also Khan 2018):

- **“Lifetime” /Longevity**

Within this category, we distinguish among:

- a) The Classics (they “pass the test of time” and they will live forever)
- b) The Trenders/trending memes (memes following trends in fashion, politics or current events and that are meant to capture attention for a short period of time)
- c) The One-Hit Wonder (memes that occur just once)

- **The targeted audience**

Within the group, the difference exists among:

- a) The Social Media (targeting a heterogeneous audience)
- b) The Niche memes (about niche experiences – food and recipes; making money online; etc.; they are “relatable” only to a small number of people who have the same interest)
- c) The Fanbase memes (just for those who are part of the fanbase)

- **Connectivity**

- a) Single memes
- b) Memes that are part of a collection (“The Series” memes)

- **Function**

According to the functions they envisage, memes can be classified into:

- a) Ideological memes (designed to criticize or, on the contrary, to support ideas on topics such as politics, religion, social life, sports, etc.)

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- b) Motivational memes (have a reflective message; teach a life lesson)
- c) Educational memes (meant to educate people; e.g. education for entrepreneurship)
- d) Marketing type memes (serve as a marketing "tool")
- e) Relatable memes (express sympathy with people passing through situations that prove to be embarrassing, difficult, awkward)
- f) Social memes (providing social commentaries on ordinary daily topics: drinking, societal norms, health condition, etc.) (see also Gil 20212)
- g) Wholesome memes (are based on emotional expression; they convey affection, love, true friendship)
- h) The comics/Humour/Puntastic memes (meant to lift the spirits; to entertain)

- **The resource they use** (see also Gil 2021)

The criterion distinguishes various categories:

- a) Content image memes (image +text); the image is repeated in a different context and the text is adapted to the respective context. Majumder et al. (2017: 2) argue that the content image is "a picture or pictures with text superimposed on top of it where the text conveys the content and image sets the tone."
- b) Video memes (the video may suffer modifications in terms of music, voice or sound)
- c) Audio memes (made up of a written text + voice)
- d) Stickers (memes used on social networks; they are made up of a popular character or a famous person + a phrase or a text)
- e) Memes of faces (black and white figure with defined expressions)
- f) Text memes (based just on text, without any image; they are usually screenshots)
- g) Gif memes (a very short video with /without a text, but having

just one word or a simple phrase)

### **3. Literature review**

In this literature review, we present two perspectives:

- a) a broad perspective, which displays memes` definition, characteristics, functions, ways of interpretation or mechanisms

<b>Author</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
Wei et al. (2012)	competitions of memes on different social media
Coscia (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• memes as specific fundamental cultural traits</li><li>• mechanisms that make memes successful</li><li>• meme relationships (competition and collaboration)</li></ul>
Milner (2013)	the dual characteristic of memes: individuality/collectivity (they are both products of groups and spaces for personal expression)
Dawkins (2014)	memes as the basic unit of culture evolution
Shifman (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• memes as cultural keys</li><li>• memes as modes of hypersignification</li></ul>
Huntington (2017a)	memes as visual rhetoric and discursive participation
Nissembaum & Shifman (2018: 296)	meme templates as expressive repertoires and potential agents in processes of globalization
Wiggins (2019)	memes as cultural commodity
Niebuurt (2021)	memes as one of the latest evolutions of “leaflet” propaganda
Valensise et al. (2021: 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• memes as “emerging aspect of the internet system of signification”</li><li>• evolution of memes in terms of their statistical complexity and entropy</li></ul>
López-Paredes & Carillo-Andrade (2022: 44)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• memes – a public conversation that has intertextual connections</li></ul>

- b) a narrow perspective, which offers the information that will further help our scientific approach. Thus, we shall start by mentioning Dawkins, who, investigating cultural memes, offered us the definition for the concept we are investigating. For him, a meme conveys "the idea of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation" (1989: 82).

Considering memes as a discursive practice and offering an analysis of a video meme, Shifman (2013) developed a tripartite typology, identifying the following elements: content (the idea that a meme conveys); form ("the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our sense"; its layout) and stance (the position that the addresser takes in relation to all the constituent elements of a meme: text, code, addressee, other speakers).

In 2019, Wiggins started from Shifman's typology and developed an elaborated model of Internet meme. The newness of Wiggins' model consists, according to him, in its viability and utility for the large display of meme sub-genres, on the one hand, and on highlighting the ideas of ideology, semiotics and intertextuality as driving forces of the typology, on the other hand.

For Wiggins (2019: 16), the content cannot be avoided, as it is the information that the memes convey; it "inheres nature of ideological practice" and incorporates stance in memes in which the human speech does not occur. An "obvious" choice for content is intertextuality. The form, that "memetic category of utility", includes video, image macro, verbal text, hashtag or GIF. As for stance, this is, in Wiggins' opinion, "loaded with meaning", and is an expression of the "deliberation" on the way context should be understood, as well as of the targeted audience. Semiotics within stance refers to the visual cues "constructed to convey a specific meaning". The discursive functions of the remixing image, as well as of the referents for meaning-making represent traces of intertextuality in stance.

#### **4. Humour in memes**

The most frequently used type of meme encountered on the internet is the image macro, defined by Dynel as “an image and a creative caption submitted by a user, typically to induce humorous responses in its receivers” (2016: 661).

Popular memes are funny “ranging from silly humor to niche humor, to more pointed political humor” (Gil 2021). Their material includes cute animals/pets, kids, everyday life situations.

According to Wiggins (2019: 11),

[...] humor is merely the surface-level entry point for social salience. Digging deeper, one can view the argument within the meme, which is usually if not always representative of an ideological practice.

The humour in memes, according to Shifman (2013), can appear due to one of the following reasons:

1. superiority – memes are created with a serious purpose, but their protagonists make them unintentionally funny;
2. playfulness – memes have an overt intention to be funny due to the association between the text and the image;
3. incongruity – memes are funny due to an unexpected correlation between an image and the text.

#### **5. Memes as a form of resistance and criticism**

Through memes, internet users have the opportunity to state their uniqueness, keeping, at the same time, their connectivity with the others. By expressing their identity and preserving their connectivity, they can take part in the media discourse not only as individuals, but also as part of a larger community.

Memes can also be interpreted as a form of resistance, in the sense given by Hegel (Hegel & Dyde 1896 – cited in Borromeo Garcia 2017: 6): people’s resistance against oppression and against what is



considered to be incorrect.

As research has proven (Milner 2013; Shifman 2014), memes help people come up with their own contributions to online public conversations especially about political issues. Thus, political memes refer either to specific political actions or to well-known political figures, their participatory nature making them serve as social criticism with the purpose of influencing the viewers. Such memes can be seen as a space of resistance, where people are empowered to reflect and criticize upon political issues concerning especially their culture.

While embedded with certain characteristics of the culture in which they were created, memes are "an effective tool in the arsenal of digital persuasion" (Nieubuur 2021).

According to Shifman (2014), memes as a form of political participation can play three different roles:

1. A means of persuasion - based on what they see in the memes and also taking into account the context, people are persuaded to think in a certain way about a political issue or figure.
2. A grassroots action – the memes may call people to take action against a political issue or figure.
3. A form of expression – memes can be a form of protest against a political issue or figure.

#### **6. "A work event" – part of the "Partygate"**

One of the recent events related to politics in the United Kingdom is Partygate. The name "Partygate" – alluding to the notorious Watergate – makes reference to a controversial scandal in 2021 whose protagonist, Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was accused of having attended a series of parties held at public venues in the period of the restrictions that were imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

One such party was held at 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the Prime Minister, on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, following Boris

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<sup>4</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/partygate>.

Johnson's announcement (on May 10<sup>th</sup>) that lockdown measures would be eased, with some restrictions still in place. The restrictions that remained valid stipulated, among other things, that people should avoid public transport, should stay two meters apart and should not take part in gatherings of more than two people in public spaces, with one exception: if these gatherings were for work purposes.

Following the publication by *The Guardian* (one year later, on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021) of a photo depicting the Prime Minister, together with his wife and some members of his staff drinking wine and eating cheese in the garden of 10 Downing Street, Boris Johnson gave a statement to the House of Commons, apologising and telling the MPs that he "believed implicitly that this was a work event".

In response, users of social media issued a variety of memes parodying the phrase and using it in various contexts in order to criticise Boris Johnson.

## 7. Analysis

The "work event" memes are image macros that generally rely on a humorous interplay between the text (which either faithfully replicates Johnson's excuse or starts from it) and the accompanying image, whose purpose is that of a punchline in a joke.

Applying the criteria for the classification of memes mentioned earlier, we can state that, according to the "Lifetime"/Longevity criterion, the "work event" memes analysed fall into the category of trenders, being the effect of a controversial event, meant to capture the attention for a short period of time. Targeting a heterogeneous audience, they are part of the social media type of memes. From the point of view of the criterion of connectivity, they belong to the connected type, as they start from the Prime Minister's excuse: I thought it was a work event. They are designed to criticize the Prime Minister's behavior, serving an ideological function, all in a humorous manner. They are content image memes, starting from the same text and changing the images.

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After analysing the memes on these sites (relating to the Prime Minister's excuse), we discovered that they can be included into two big categories, depending on the images that are used: "Work event" memes depicting Boris Johnson (7.1) and "Work event" memes depicting plain people (7.2).

### 7.1. "Work event" memes depicting Boris Johnson

A series of "work event" memes use, as a cultural mark, Boris Johnson's image.



**Figure 1.** *Boris Johnson*

For example, in Figure 1, the meme depicts a confused Boris Johnson, as if drunk or with a hangover, while the text offers the explanation for his condition: Just been to a very enjoyable work event. In this meme, the humour stems from the playfulness rendered by the congruency between the photo and the text, the latter being a slightly changed version of the Prime Minister's apology. At the same time, humour is created by the absence of the subject in the sentence

functioning as the text for the meme. It can be considered as either a quotation (I have just been to a very enjoyable work event) or a comment belonging to someone else (He has just been to a very enjoyable work event). The creators of this meme express their protest by adding an adjective at the absolute superlative, “very enjoyable”, to modify the compound noun “work event”. This adjective implicitly suggests that the gathering was not exactly work-related, thus justifying the photo.



**Figure 2.** *The Prime Minister, his wife, and staff members*

The meme in Figure 2 plays with the photo (depicting the Prime Minister, together with his wife and some members of his staff drinking wine and eating cheese in the garden of 10 Downing Street) that appeared in *The Guardian*, transforming it into a CAPTCHA (under the name of TWATCHA). If, generally, in computing, a CAPTCHA, as a challenge-response test, is used to check whether the user is human, in

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this meme its completion is the gateway to the work event. The ingenious and playful association between the text and the image is the one that makes the meme humorous. By using an element related to computing, the meme emphasizes once more the netizens' protest: while the rest of the people in the country were forced to stay in quarantine because of Covid-19 restrictions, the Prime Minister was hosting a party in his garden. While he was enjoying the party, the great majority of people had only one option in order to stay connected with their peers: to sit in front of a computer.



**Figure 3.** Boris Johnson and three other politicians

Humour in Figure 3 comes out of the incongruity between the picture (which depicts Boris Johnson and three other politicians, dressed for a club party and standing in front of 10 Downing Street) and the text saying Work event, not a party (thus highlighting the Prime Minister's effort to hide the truth). This meme, through the incongruity between the text and the image, tries to persuade people on the deceiving nature of the Prime Minister's apology.

## 7.2. "Work event" memes depicting plain people

Some memes, using the Prime Minister's exact words of apology or a slightly modified version of them, depict ordinary people at social gatherings with cultural significance, touching British stereotypes such as:

- British people are party-goers and they know how to party (Figure 4)
- British people are huge football fans (Figure 5)
- British people like to celebrate in outdoor public places (Figure 6 and Figure 7).



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.

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The humour in these memes is rendered by the incongruity between the text and the image, which induces a funny impression of confusion and bewilderment caused by the difference between the seriousness and formality of a work event stated in the text and the relaxed and informal atmosphere from the photos. At the surface level, these memes are a form of protest both against Johnson's attitude during the Covid-19 restrictions (attending parties) and against his excuse (allegedly mistaking the parties for work events). At a deeper level, they constitute a means of persuasion regarding the Prime Minister's attitude towards the ordinary citizens, whom he considers naive and gullible.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Another stereotype that links the “work event” memes to the British culture is the fact that British people like to drink a lot. Some memes depict people with numerous pints of beer attending something that seems to be a festival (Figure 8), or a little tipsy and still consuming alcohol (Figure 9) or even fainted in the street because of alcohol abuse (figure 10), all under the same heading, I thought it was a work event. The humour stems, again, from the incongruity between the text (implying the idea of work) and the image (definitely implying relaxation). These memes are also a form of protest, implicitly accusing the Prime Minister not only of being deceitful, but also of having deprived them of one of their favourite forms of relaxation. At the same time, they constitute a perfect example of what is called “everyday resistance” (a concept introduced by James Scott in 1985), through which power (represented, in our case, by Boris Johnson`s official position and the rules he imposed) is undermined through people`s routine and everyday actions (using social media and contributing content on it).

Everyday resistance is not easily recognized like public and collective resistance – such as rebellions or demonstrations – but it is typically hidden or disguised...  
[...] everyday resistance suggests that resistance is integrated into social life and is a part of normality...a recurrent social phenomenon [...] (Vinthagen & Johansson 2013: 2-3)



### **Conclusions**

The memes analysed share some common characteristics in terms of form: they have a short text (generally Boris Johnson's apologetic phrase: I thought it was a work event, or parodic variations of it) placed above an image (that either depicts the Prime Minister or plain people partying) which acts as a punchline for the meme. These common characteristics shape the content, the British cultural resistance against the Prime Minister and his reaction to Partygate. In terms of stance, the "work event" memes, serving as social criticism, humorously display culture-related images of people (Boris Johnson) and places (10 Downing Street), as well as cultural stereotypes (British as party-goers, heavy-drinkers or football fans) in an effort to persuade the viewers of the hypocrisy of their Prime Minister.

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- (2021): "Self-expression in Language Autobiographies. The Language of Emotion and Its Implications for EFL Classes" (Raluca Galița & Elena Bonta), in *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics (JIPED)*, Vol. 25, pp. 87-102;
- (2020): "Scrolling the Internet: fear in disguise – a corpus-based analysis of the new langdemic" (Elena Bonta & Raluca Galița), in *Interstudia. Revista Centrului Interdisciplinar de Studiu al Formelor Discursive Contemporane*, no. 27/ 2020, Alma Mater: Bacău.
- (2019): "Elements of Romania's country branding vs. British stereotypes in Gândul campaign 'Why don't you come over to Romania?'" (Raluca Galița), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, nr.24/2019, Alma Mater: Bacău, pp. 69-78.

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**Selected publications:**

- (2019): “Demotivating-triggering factors in learning and using a foreign language – an empirical study” (Elena Bonta), in *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics* (JIPED), 23(2), pp. 177-198.
- (2018): “Teachers’ Creative Disposition and the Management of Environment in the English Class” (Elena Bonta & Raluca Galița), in *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics* (JIPED), 22(2), pp. 175-192.
- (2015): *A Terminological Guide to Interactional Pragmatics* (Elena Bonta), Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință.