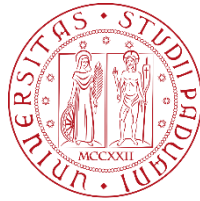


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**FROM STREETS TO SCREENS: THE POWER OF VISUAL  
COMMUNICATION**

**ANALYZING BANKSY'S STREET ART AND POLITICAL MEMES  
AS FORMS OF PROPAGANDA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION**

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# Abstract

This thesis aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between propaganda and art. It begins by tracing the historical significance of this relationship and underscores its relevance in contemporary society. The research proves the power of visual communication and its intensive impact on public opinion. Chapter 1 is the introduction of the whole research to have a summarized part for the aim of the paper. Chapter 2 offers a review of existing literature on propaganda in art. It is within this context that Banksy's street art and political internet memes present themselves as subjects for in-depth analysis. Chapter 3 schemes the research methodology employed to analyze Banksy's street art and political Pepe the Frog memes. The underlying rationale behind selecting these cases is expounded. In Chapter 4, Banksy's street art takes center stage. In this section, an examination breaks down the visual components, symbolism, and conveyed messages within Banksy's artworks. We can see how Banksy's art deals with politics and society, leaving a lasting impact on public conversations. In Chapter 5, this section explores the visual and textual components of Pepe the Frog, examining their unique sense of humor and virality. The research uncovers how political memes propagate ideologies, shape perceptions, and how they are connected to socio-political issues. It also recognizes the role of social media platforms in the dissemination of these digital creations. Chapter 6 embarks on a comparative analysis of Banksy's street art and political internet memes. Here, common characteristics and distinctive features are being discovered. This chapter presents their diverse mediums, target audiences, and messaging strategies. Chapter 7 brings together our research findings. This chapter summarizes how visual communication shapes political discussions.

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# 1. Introduction

This study examines two different but equally influential forms of visual communication in everyday life: graffiti and political internet memes. Both are potent tools for conveying cultural, social, and political messages, resonating with audiences through their visual impact and ability to provoke thought. This thesis aims to explore and compare two specific cases, Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog memes as forms of contemporary visual communication and form of modern propaganda. By analyzing these two visual phenomena, the research seeks to a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of visual communication and its influence on public opinion and social narratives.

Banksy, a mysterious and prolific street artist, has gained worldwide recognition for his thought-provoking artworks. His graffiti pieces often challenge societal norms, critique political institutions, and shine a light on pressing social issues. Banksy's art transcends traditional boundaries, appearing in public spaces where it confronts viewers with powerful imagery and thought-provoking messages. Through his art, Banksy not only starts conversations but also challenges viewers to think about the status quo and consider alternative perspectives.

On the other hand, the internet has a new form of visual communication: political internet memes. Created and shared rapidly across online platforms, these memes use humor, satire, and irony to comment on political figures, events, and policies. They engage audiences through relatable and shareable content, shaping public opinion and influencing discourse in the digital sphere. Political memes, like Banksy's graffiti, have the power to challenge authority, point out hypocrisy, and mobilize communities around social and political matters.

Initially a harmless comic character, Pepe's image was later appropriated by online communities to promote hate, racism, and extremism. This transformation underscores the complexities of internet culture and the unpredictable nature of meme-driven symbols. However, Pepe's story also shows how symbols can be reclaimed and the need to educate people about their meanings. In essence, from the streets to screens, Banksy's graffiti and political internet memes exemplify the power of visual communication in shaping public opinion. Whether through thought-provoking street art or shareable online content, these forms of propaganda wield significant influence in contemporary discourse, challenging norms, sparking conversations, and ultimately shaping the cultural landscape.

While there is substantial literature on graffiti and internet memes individually, there is a gap in research specifically about Pepe and Banksy or research that directly compares these two forms of expression. This thesis addresses this gap by analyzing how both Banksy's graffiti and Pepe the Frog serve as mediums for political commentary and social critique. Additionally, there is debate about how cultural symbols are borrowed and changed. This research will investigate this issue by examining both Banksy's art and the Pepe meme.

Banksy serves as a case study for examining the impact of graffiti on public consciousness. His works provide a rich source of material for analyzing how street art can convey powerful political messages and influence societal attitudes. While Pepe's case studies show the complexity of the internet communities and meme's power in symbolism. By comparing Banksy's graffiti with the Pepe the Frog meme, the thesis will highlight similarities and differences in how visual art and digital memes operate as tools for social and political engagement. Banksy's controversial status within the art world and his use of public spaces for unauthorized art offer a parallel to the controversial nature of Pepe the Frog's appropriation. This comparison will help highlight bigger ideas about how culture is made, who owns it, and who has the power when creating and sharing symbols.

In conclusion, incorporating Banksy's graffiti and Pepe the Frog into this thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of how visual symbols function in both physical and digital spaces to challenge, reflect, and shape societal values. The research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary visual culture and its implications for public discourse by examining these two distinct yet similar phenomena. To address this research problem, the study

will focus on the following questions:

How do Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog function as contemporary art forms of propaganda, and what sets them apart from traditional propaganda techniques?

This question aims to explore the mechanisms through which Banksy's graffiti and the Pepe the Frog meme communicate their messages. It will investigate how these forms of art leverage visual and digital platforms to propagate their ideas and how they differ from classical propaganda methods in terms of approach and audience engagement.

What are the commonalities and disparities in their strategies, impact, and effectiveness in shaping public opinion?

This question seeks to identify the similarities and differences in how Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog meme influence public perception. It will analyze their respective strategies in message delivery, the extent of their impact on different audiences, and their overall effectiveness as tools of socio-political influence.

All in all, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Banksy's street art and the Pepe the Frog meme as contemporary forms of propaganda, examining their strategies, impacts, and cultural significance. By exploring their unique characteristics, contextualizing them within broader socio-political contexts, and comparing their approaches and effectiveness, the research seeks to deepen our understanding of how visual and digital art can shape public opinion and provoke meaningful discourse. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute new insights to the fields of art, media, and cultural studies, shedding light on the evolving role of art as a tool for social commentary and political expression in the digital age. The study provides a critical examination of Banksy's graffiti and the Pepe the Frog meme, contributing to a deeper understanding of their artistic and cultural significance and their role in challenging dominant narratives and fostering critical thinking. Given the socio-political themes addressed by Banksy's art and the Pepe the Frog meme, the research offers valuable perspectives on pressing issues such as social justice, identity politics, and the impact of digital culture on public discourse. By exploring the strategies, impacts, and effectiveness of Banksy's street art and the Pepe the Frog meme, the study enriches scholarly discussions in the fields of media studies, cultural studies, and art criticism, contributing to interdisciplinary dialogue and theoretical frameworks. The research findings can inform media literacy efforts aimed at empowering individuals to critically evaluate visual and digital media, discerning artistic expression, political commentary, and propaganda in an increasingly mediated world.

Chapter 2 delves into the intricate relationship between art and propaganda, revealing how artistic mediums have historically been harnessed to shape public perception and advance ideological agendas. It begins by elucidating the nuanced connection between propaganda and art, exploring how art serves as a potent vehicle for conveying political, social, and cultural messages to the masses. Then, it turns its focus to street art and graffiti, vibrant forms of expression that have emerged as potent tools for dissent, activism, and social commentary. Central to this discussion is the mysterious figure of Banksy, whose provocative works challenge established norms and provoke critical reflection on contemporary issues. Moreover, chapter 2 traces their evolution from viral jokes to powerful instruments of political communication. It examines the dual nature of memes, both as sources of entertainment and as vehicles for disseminating ideological beliefs and mobilizing online communities. Lastly, the chapter explores the concept of graffiti as a meme, illustrating how graffiti art transcends physical spaces to become iconic symbols of resistance and cultural identity, through these diverse lenses.

In Chapter 3, the research questions mentioned above are presented in this chapter. These questions serve as the foundation for the chosen methodology, steering the research toward a qualitative comparative analysis. Through this approach, the chapter aims to provide an in-depth examination of Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog, identifying unique attributes that distinguish them from traditional propaganda while exploring their shared characteristics and differences in influencing public opinion. The chapter concludes with an overview of the methodology's key components, outlining the process for identifying themes, analyzing visual elements, assessing

emotional impact, exploring thematic content, and evaluating message conveyance and impact. Through this rigorous comparative analysis, the chapter aims to shed light on the evolving landscape of visual communication and the profound influence of art, humor, and symbolism in shaping public discourse in the digital era.

Chapter 4 delves into Banksy's graffiti, exploring its bold imagery and symbolic depth. From anti-war sentiment to critiques of capitalism, Banksy's art challenges viewers to confront societal issues. Through his distinctive style, Banksy communicates powerful messages about conflict, consumer culture, and more. Rats, a recurring motif, carry nuanced meanings, while his use of symbolism exposes the absurdities of contemporary capitalism. This chapter, through the cases, analyzes Banksy's graffiti as a form of visual communication, delving into its propagandistic elements and addressing criticisms. Through this exploration, we gain insight into Banksy's artistic vision and his profound impact on public discourse.

Chapter 5 deals with the digital evolution of Pepe the Frog, a cartoon icon that has become a significant symbol in contemporary culture. This chapter explores Pepe's journey from a simple internet meme to a politicized figure, examining his various roles and interpretations over time. Pepe's significance is analyzed through his visual symbolism and the different eras he has traversed. From his early adoption as a harmless meme to his politicization in contexts such as the alt-right's "meme magic" and the Hong Kong protests, Pepe's story reflects the diverse dynamics of online discourse. Additionally, the chapter discusses the impact of deepfake technology on Pepe's digital presence and considers why he is an important case study in contemporary visual culture. Through this exploration, we gain insights into the intersections of politics, technology, and symbolism in shaping our digital landscape.

Chapter 6 presents a comparative analysis of Banksy's graffiti and Pepe the Frog, covering aspects like artistic expression, cultural impact, reception, controversy, ownership, transformation, and adaptation. It examines their visual language, cultural influence, reception across communities, ownership challenges, evolution over time, and interaction in online and offline spaces. The chapter concludes by summarizing key findings and suggesting future research directions in visual communication.

## 2. Connection between Propaganda and Art

Why is it hard to define propaganda? Jowett G. and O'Donnell (1992) highlighted three reasons. On the one hand, it is tough to pinpoint a precise definition of propaganda that everyone agrees on. Diving deeper into the topic, we can see that everyone has their own interpretation and definition. Since propaganda can be exemplified in numerous different cases, it is challenging to apply the same interpretation to all of them. Perhaps, similarities can be identified, but each can be considered as a unique case with its own distinctive features. On the other hand, it is almost impossible to see propaganda as a neutral tool, with its positivity or negativity depending on how it is used, and it is a challenging task to judge it. The third reason in their research follows from the second point that we attach emotions to the topic. The negative reputation associated with the term "propaganda" in our society is particularly strong. They think this is related to the enduring and somewhat problematic power of Nazi mythology and imagery contributing to the negative perception of propaganda. Essentially, it highlights how the term "propaganda" is often viewed negatively due to its historical associations with Nazi propaganda and the lasting impact of that history. According to Clark (1997) propaganda simply means spreading specific ideas or information. He develops the idea of propaganda in his work that the word comes from Latin and originally meant "to propagate" or "to sow." However, it gained a negative connotation when the Vatican used it in 1622 to refer to the promotion of the Roman Catholic faith in the New World and opposition to Protestantism. Since then, "propaganda" has often been associated with negative and dishonest communication. So, we can see that people interpret and use synonyms for propaganda as lies, distortion, deceit, and manipulation as synonyms for propaganda. Clark

claims that is why calling something propaganda implies it is trying to mislead or manipulate. Many people rather do not use the word "propaganda" because of this negative association. Ellul (1973) believes that most American authors accept the concept defined by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, which was inspired by political scientist and communications theorist Harold Lasswell, that propaganda involves deliberate actions to influence opinions. He provides a similar definition as the synonyms mentioned earlier, with a negative connotation. Ellul further argues that propaganda can only emerge and develop under specific circumstances. Chance events or historical factors often influence these circumstances. Contemporary propaganda would not be possible without the mass media. This includes inventions like the printing press, radio, television, and film, and nowadays, the internet is a new tool for propaganda.

Art often serves as a medium through which propagandists convey their messages, utilizing various forms of artistic expression to promote their ideologies. However, it is important to make a clear distinction between political art and propaganda. Not all art with political themes should automatically be categorized as propaganda. Some artists create political art to express their views or critique societal issues without the intention of manipulating or deceiving their audience. Often, the line between the two is quite thin, and it is not always possible to make a distinction. Schumm (2018) emphasizes that the challenge here is to come up with a definition of propaganda that includes art with propagandistic elements but does not make the definition so broad that it includes every type of political art. In other words, it is about finding a balance – recognizing when art is trying to influence people's opinions or beliefs in a particular way while still distinguishing it from other political art forms that might have different intentions or effects. He thinks it is important to preserve the boundaries between genuine artistic expression and manipulative messaging in the realm of art and politics. Sometimes, a piece of art that was originally made for personal or non-political reasons can be turned into propaganda. This happens when someone, like a propagandist, uses the artwork to convey a specific message, giving it a new meaning. Schumm explains this case through a well-known historical example. He shows the case of composer Wagner, who did not create his operas with Nazi ideas in mind. However, the Nazis later used his work to promote their ideology. This example also illustrates that when we look at a piece of art, we should think about not only how it was created but also how it is being used. Therefore, it is evident from this that depending on the situation and context, a work of art may appear as propaganda in one context while not in another. To figure out whether it is propaganda or not, we need to understand the intentions behind its use and the specific context in which it is being used. That helps us decide if it is meant to persuade or not. Some artists willingly adjust themselves with a political ideology and choose to create art that supports it. They contribute to politics through their work as committed artists. Alternatively, artists may create political art due to coercion or under orders from a political authority. In such cases, according to Auerbach J. and Castronovo R. (2013), their artistic freedom may be compromised, and they may not create art of their own will. In some instances, artists may not fit into either category. Their art might be influenced by political ideas or funded by political figures, but they may not fully adjust to the ideology or may retain some degree of creative freedom. Papadopoulou & Veneti (2005) describe "Committed Art in the Service of Politics" a situation where artists actively engage in creating artworks to endorse and advance a specific political ideology or goal. In such cases, artists are tasked with producing works that effectively convey political messages and influence people's behavior in line with the political agenda. However, determining whether an artist who creates artwork for political purposes can be considered a "free artist" is a complex matter with no clear-cut answer. We can see an interesting parallel between art and artist. E.H. Gombrich's ideas in 'Art an Illusion' have been interpreted by Wood (2009) as Gombrich was against describing the story of art as a story of progress, so it is not a straight line; thus he did not agree that modern art step forward on the earlier art. Furthermore, according to him, modern art does not know more about the world; it only proposes a new social order. It means art always shows the actual situation, this is an age



drawing. We cannot compare works of art from different eras and value that they are progressing and developing in a straight line. It is important to understand that art is self-expression; it shows the artists' point of view, so it cannot be completely objective since they show their insights, we see through their eyes, and these are influenced by their experiences and opinions. Everyone experiences reality differently, which is why two artists cannot judge the world certain situations, and eras in the same way. The work must be observed with a critical eye and evaluated at our discretion. The art world is a community that is prepared to see the world as the artists do. His thesis is about what counts as art in one age, in an earlier age, it would not have counted as art. According to Danto (1998), when we value something as a work of art, we thereby make it subject to interpretation. If the need for a particular subject ceases what was an art of work before, it loses its interpretation. He puts it in the way that it only becomes a mere thing (Lind, 1992). Thus, the art world community should deal with a subject and the subject must be interpretable somehow if it wants to count as art. Danto's theory is that art must always be about something in the world. Danto (1981) claims "To see something as art demands nothing less than this, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art." (as cited in Lind, 1992). Thus, if the art community does not interpret it, it would never be claimed as art. Lewis (1969) thought that "people believes that art is a good in an "enriching" type of way, making us better people and promoting a healthy and free society" (p. 42). He sees this connection between politics and art. He believes that most people tend to view propaganda negatively because it is often seen as something that oversimplifies our complex human experiences, making things less complicated both for individuals and society, and possibly limiting our freedom. Moreover, Lewis highlights that most people think they can tell the difference between art and propaganda, while this separation is not always so simple in practice, and perhaps they are not aware that they are influenced. According to Lewis, if we declare that true art is a constructive force, or at least a reflection of a prosperous and inclusive society, while propaganda is more destructive and creates an image of the enemy, it follows that we must distinguish between the two.

Jowett G. and O'Donnell (1992) write that propaganda and persuasion are different forms of communication. In their definition propaganda aims to achieve a specific response that serves the propagandist's goals, often operates in a one-sided manner, while persuasion is a process where both the person trying to convince someone (the persuader) and the person being convinced are actively involved and considered. Propaganda combines informative and persuasive elements, making it a unique type of communication. Pratkanis and Turner (1996) defined the function of propaganda as "attempts to move a recipient to a predetermined point of view by using simple images and slogans that truncate thought by playing on prejudices and emotions" (p. 190) People often make ethical judgments about the goals or purposes that propaganda serves. These judgments can then influence how we view propaganda itself as a means or tool. Ellul (1965) illustrates with the example that, if someone believes that democracy is a good system, they may see propaganda that supports democracy as a good thing, even if it uses the same techniques as propaganda used to support a dictatorship. In other words, the ethical assessment of the end goal (supporting democracy) can affect our perception of the means (propaganda) even if the techniques used are similar. So, to put it simply, if the propaganda supports an ideology or something that we consider to be good, then we consider the propaganda itself to be good, and if it supports something that is reprehensible, then the propaganda is bad.

No matter the differences in countries and how they use propaganda, they all have one thing in common, they want it to work effectively. Propaganda is created mainly because there is a desire to act and give strong power to a certain policy or decision. Those who use propaganda are primarily focused on making it work well. This is one of the most important rules to remember when we talk about propaganda. If propaganda does not work, it is not really propaganda (Ellul, 1965).

Studying propaganda can be approached from various perspectives. According to Jowett G. and O'Donnell V., they interpreted Burnett (1989) examining propaganda as a historical study means looking at the actions of propagandists as events and considering how these actions might have influenced latter events. Viewing propaganda through a journalistic lens involves understanding how news is managed to highlight positive elements, often portraying institutions in positive evaluation. From a political science angle, studying propaganda involves analyzing the beliefs and motives of those using it and analyzing how they spread their ideas to shape public opinion. A sociological approach focuses on how social movements use propaganda and how opposing movements create counter-propaganda. Jowett G. and O'Donnell V., focus on cultural studies, which focus on how culture and power are connected, the connection between a person and a symbol is complicated. William S. Lewis (1969) raises the question that we still need to figure out how to tell apart cultural expressions that support the existing political status quo from those that propose different and ~~partly~~ improved ways of organizing society. He gives the example of two thinkers with opposite political orientations. The German critical theorist Theodor Adorno and the American pragmatist John Dewey. He says despite variations, there is a common ground: both want to separate real art from "art" that simply supports the existing political order. Moreover, they believe that by making this distinction, real art can be the catalyst for positive political and cultural shifts toward true democracy. Dewey (1939) believed that propaganda is ~~bring~~ a rich culture. Adorno, on the other hand, says that late capitalism creates a culture controlled by the "culture industry," where people are more like consumers than independent thinkers. This, Adorno argues, hinders the development of individuals capable of making ~~his~~ own choices in a democratic society. Both Dewey and Adorno agree that real art stands apart from propaganda. They both view real art as something that can kick start and carry us toward a more vibrant and democratic political life (Lewis, 2005).

Clark (1997) shows another challenge: what the risk of is disproportionately focusing on regimes that have historically been seen as adversaries of Western democracies. In many literatures we can see the transmission of dominant ideological beliefs in the image-saturated world of capitalist consumerism by analyzing various aspects of mass media. Clark also agrees with the idea that art and propaganda do not always go hand in hand. In other words, art propaganda is not always embedded in the artwork itself. It does not necessarily express the artist's intentions. Instead, art can become a form of propaganda through its function, location within public or private spaces, and its connections with other objects and actions. He highlights that there are numerous means of conveying an ideological message: architecture, theater, music, sports, clothing, and haircuts can communicate a political view, as can spectacles of violence, such as book-burning, assassination, suicide and terrorism" (Clark, 1997 p. 12). He thinks that the evolution of modern propaganda is closely connected to the emergence of mass culture. The term "mass culture" is challenging to pin down precisely. Both politics and art are intricately intertwined with ideologies, making their separation a challenging endeavor. Politics frequently utilizes art as a powerful instrument, while art, in turn, finds inspiration from political landscapes and events. Art serves as a critical commentary on the prevailing age, inherently embedded with the politics of its era. Consequently, many artworks emerge as strong expressions either criticizing or supporting the political dynamics of their time.

### 2.1.1. Types of Propaganda

We can delve into the diverse world of propaganda, highlighting two primary distinctions: horizontal vs. vertical and rational vs. irrational propaganda.

Horizontal propaganda targets smaller, like-minded groups to reinforce existing beliefs. Ellul (1965) makes a difference between two types of horizontal propaganda. In contrast, vertical propaganda reaches a broader audience with top-down messaging from authorities or institutions. Technically the leader influences the crowd. Ellul calls it a quasi-hypnotic condition. He uses this expression to describe how a leader can depersonalize an individual with a speech.

In other words, both horizontal and vertical propaganda aim to influence attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. They employ emotional appeals and persuasive techniques through various channels. The key difference is in their target audience and scope: horizontal is narrow, focusing on homogeneous groups, and vertical addresses a diverse society. Moving to the realm of rational vs. irrational propaganda, the distinction lies in their approach and emotional impact. Rational propaganda employs logic, facts, information and well-constructed arguments to appeal to intellect. In contrast, irrational propaganda plays with emotions, often using fear or anger to influence beliefs without relying on evidence or logical reason. Think of sensationalized political ads that exploit anxieties. These forms differ in method and content. They use various communication channels like media, advertising, or public speeches. Propaganda, whether rational or irrational, can serve positive or negative purposes depending on its intent. Propaganda can also be categorized as white, gray, or black. According to Jowett G. and O'Donnell V., this categorization is based on the accuracy of the communicated information. White propaganda originates from a clearly identified source, and the information it conveys is generally reliable. Black propaganda can be said to be the exact opposite of white propaganda. It hides information or falsifies it, spreading lies. Black propaganda encompasses extensive deceitful tactics. Gray propaganda falls between white and black propaganda. The source may or may not be correctly disclosed, and the accuracy of the information is questionable. Gray propaganda is also employed to mystify an adversary or competitor (Jowett G. & O'Donnell V., 1992).

### 2.1.2. Street Art and Graffiti

“Anyone who tries to tell you the history of graffiti is either a liar or a fool.” (Gastman, 2010, p. 15).

Urban street art refers to artwork that is created in public spaces within cities or towns (Alix Wood, 2014). This type of art is diverse because it is not limited to traditional art galleries or private spaces, but it is intended to be experienced by a wide audience in public areas. Urban street art is not limited to indoor spaces but is found in outdoor, urban environments. These artworks can be located basically on every kind of surface, such as on the sides of buildings, on streets, in parks, or even on public transportation.

The word urban refers to areas characterized by the presence of towns or cities. Urban art is typically associated with these populated environments, where a diverse audience is more likely to encounter the art. It is often created without any formal entrance fee, making it accessible to anyone who passes by. We can say that street art removes the barriers that can exist in art in the traditional sense. One of the primary goals of urban street art is to be seen by many people. Artists may choose highly visible locations to ensure their work reaches a broad audience. They use their work as a medium to convey messages or commentary on various topics, such as social issues, politics, or environmental concerns. Their art serves as a public platform for expressing their views and conversations. In addition to conveying messages, many street artists aim to make the urban landscape nicer. With vibrant colors, intricate designs, and imaginative concepts, they transform boring or mundane public spaces into visually attractive and lively environments. It is, a matter of debate as to what is nice for whom. We can also see many examples of how some artists want to draw attention to certain beauty flaws in the city by painting, for example, some kind of work on the broken asphalt or creating graffiti on run-down bus stops. In summary, urban street art is a form of artistic expression that increases in public urban environments. It includes a wide range of styles and intentions, from conveying messages and social commentary to simply adding color and vibrancy to city streets (Gasman, 2012; Alix Wood, 2014; Banksy, 2007; Lewisohn, 2008).

Graffiti, as an art form, has a rich and diverse history that overreaches millenary and continents. Graffiti has evolved in numerous ways. Drawing on walls can be traced back to the distant past when early humans left their marks on cave walls. These primitive drawings and symbols served as a means of communication and expression, capturing the essence of life in prehistoric societies. Perhaps this form of communication cannot be called as the father of graffiti yet, but it is certain that we can discover common features between the two phenomena. The modern graffiti born in the 1960s. Graffiti as we know it today began to take shape in the 1960s in Philadelphia and New York City. Graffiti as a new term was first used by Norman Mailer, who wrote for the New York Times (Journey Forever Magazine, 2020). Gastman (2010) tried to trace the colorful history of graffiti in his book, *The History of American graffiti*. He starts the story of "tagging" as a central element of graffiti culture, with notable figures like TAKI 183 gaining recognition with their prolific tagging. The more places they tag or the harder it is to remove, the more famous they become. That is why tagging is seen as a simple form of graffiti (Journey Forever Magazine, 2020). The 1970s witnessed the explosion of graffiti as an art form, particularly in New York City. Subway cars became the canvas for artists like Phase 2 and Stay High 149, who transitioned from simple tags to more complex and more elaborate pieces. Chalfant and Cooper (1984) documented this era in their book "Subway Art." Graffiti's influence extended beyond New York City in the 1980s. Street culture can be found anywhere and spreads organically when it connects with like-minded individuals, often transcending nationality and political histories. Graffiti has proliferated worldwide, notably in the 1990s, reaching places in Eastern Europe that would have seemed unimaginable just a few years prior. Indeed, this expansion was logical, given that graffiti had been a persistent presence at the doorstep of Communism, notably the Berlin Wall, for decades. Graffiti was just one of the many cultural movements that traveled the globe, competing for recognition, discovering new arenas, and engaging generations of young innovators with fresh ideas and techniques (Gastman, 2007). European cities like London, Paris, and Berlin embraced the movement, giving rise to influential artists like Banksy, Blek le Rat, and Futura 2000. Wildstyle graffiti, characterized by intricate lettering and designs. Banksy's journey to becoming a worldwide sensation with his politically themed stenciled artworks symbolized the shift of graffiti from a local street art form to a global cultural phenomenon (Lewisohn, 2008). Stencil graffiti involves using stencils crafted from materials like paper or cardboard to produce easily replicable images or text. The chosen design is cut out of the medium, and then the image is applied to a surface using spray paint or roll-on paint (Journey Forever Magazine, 2020). The emergence of street art, such as graffiti, has been part of the urban landscape since the formation of cities. However, it was not until around the year 2000 that people started using the term street art in the way we understand it today (Gastman, 2010). Graffiti and street art have historically been perceived in numerous cultures as acts of vandalism, commonly linked to urban youth and individuals engaged in criminal behavior, employing spray paint as their medium. Young individuals who simply want to leave a mark on the city. When we talk about art, famous creations by renowned painters like Sandro Botticelli, Claude Monet, Edvard Munch, or Vincent van Gogh generally come to mind. However, the true creators of city graffiti remain largely unknown, and perhaps today, it is more challenging to determine whether something qualifies as a work of art or not. But nowadays, things are changing in the art world, and some new ideas are starting to challenge this view. In recent years, graffiti has continued to evolve and diversify. Many cities have designated legal walls and street art festivals, fostering a more accepting environment for graffiti and street art. The history of graffiti is a testament to the flexibility and adaptability of the art form. From its prehistoric origins to its contemporary global presence, graffiti has continually evolved, reflecting cultural, social, and artistic shifts. Key artists and events have played cardinal roles in shaping graffiti's trajectory, leaving a mark on the world of art and urban expression. Perhaps it is easier to answer the question, what is graffiti, than what is art, what is propaganda. But if we go beyond the basic definition, we can hit many walls and, as we try to interpret the phenomenon more and more deeply, we can see that graffiti is much more complex than simply calling it a mural. Graffiti as a phenomenon includes many forms, features,

problems and themes. It has cultural and social context, legal and ethical issues, public perceptions and receptions. Moreover, it can be a form of expression, political activism, shows different subcultures, raises questions about urban spaces, and raises questions about public art and art in general. In line with Banksy's proposition (2005) graffiti is not just an art form or a hobby; for many, it becomes a lifestyle that can consume a significant part of their daily routine. It transcends mere vandalism and reflects cultural, social, and political shifts. Graffiti artists see themselves as visual storytellers, using the walls and streets as their canvas (Gastman, 2010). Banksy (2005) often calls the walls weapons. According to Gastman, artists engage in a dialogue with the public, challenging perceptions of what constitutes art. Graffiti has always existed on the fringes of the art world, but its influence on contemporary art and design is undeniable. It has contributed to the emergence of street art as a legitimate artistic movement. The act of creating graffiti is a powerful claim of identity and presence in an urban environment. It is a way for artists to reclaim public spaces and leave their mark on the world. Artists often use it as a platform to voice their opinions and engage in public discourse. Street cultures today are instinct with influences drawn from subcultures across the globe. The proliferation of user-controlled media has significantly facilitated the dissemination of messages, styles, and various forms of art. Graffiti and street artists' creations can be found adorning not only walls and trains but also officially commissioned advertisements and T-shirt designs. Global travelers act as carriers of street cultures, disseminating them like contagions, leaving their mark wherever they go while introducing new variations when they return to their home. The street subcultures of different countries are able to merge and be inspired by each other.

“The greatest crimes in the world are not committed by people breaking the rules but by people following the rules. It's people who follow orders that drop bombs and massacre villages. As a precaution to ever committing major acts of evil it is our solemn duty never to do what we're told, this is the only way we can be sure.” (Banksy, 2007, p.51).

The tension between graffiti as an illegal activity and as a recognized art form is at the center of its attractiveness. This duality challenges traditional concepts of artistic legitimation. Graffiti artists have a deep sense of community and respect for one another's work. They often collaborate and share ideas, contributing to the development of the art form. Graffiti's journey from the streets to galleries and museums has important discussions about the sale of art and the role of public art in contemporary society. These messages highlight how graffiti is associated with the broader world of art, serving as a means of self-expression, social commentary, and artistic innovation. It explores the complex relationship between graffiti as an underground movement and its growing recognition within the mainstream art world. Many people agree that graffiti is considered a crime since graffiti is often created without permission, thus it is against the law. According to McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) however, it is important to dig down deeper into the nature of graffiti as a crime and what happens when it is criminalized. Framing graffiti as a crime stems from a particular view of how it fits into the moral and legal framework of a society. This viewpoint sees graffiti as vandalism because it violates property rights and disrupts the established order, which justifies its criminal classification. However, it's important to recognize that many people see graffiti as a form of artistic expression that defies conventional norms and brings a unique character to urban areas (Gastman, 2010; McAuliffe and Iveson, 2011). It can be argued that legally graffitied walls deprive the creator of the true value and intent of the graffiti. At the same time, it is a great opportunity for other artists to deliver their works to a large audience within a legal framework, since not everyone necessarily wants to get involved in legal disputes with their works. Perhaps this could be an opportunity for the acceptance of graffiti to progress to a greater extent. Then the question may arise, does this mean that graffiti loses its illegal features and original meaning? Banksy (2007) argues that graffiti is often misunderstood and feared by people, but he thinks mainly graffiti elicits this emotion from politicians, advertising executives and other graffiti groups. He points out that the real problems of the neighborhoods

often come from companies that flood public spaces with advertising and attempt to manipulate consumer behavior. He believes maybe this is the way we can answer them. Moreover, he claims that graffiti is the most honest way for people to express themselves. It is displayed on some of the finest walls the town boasts, and the cost of entry does not deter anyone. Those who argue that graffiti is art tend to focus specifically on aspects related to content and style. When advocating for the artistic merits of graffiti, some individuals have highlighted the presence of graffiti-style works in art galleries and have emphasized the fact that the graffiti-writing community has produced renowned artists like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. At times, the assertion that graffiti qualifies as art has led to alternative approaches, such as the establishment of legal walls where graffiti can be created with proper permission. These sanctioned areas are intended to offer opportunities for artists to engage with the public and to provide an avenue for redirecting young individuals who may be at risk of engaging in more serious criminal activities. Importantly, these designated sites also serve to confine the urban presence of graffiti to specific locations (Gastman, 2010). Banksy highlights the unique nature of art compared to other forms of culture. He underscores that art is distinct from other cultural forms because its success is not primarily determined by its audience. Unlike music, literature, or film where the public's engagement significantly impacts the culture's creation and quality, this art operates differently. In addition, he also thinks that a relatively small and exclusive group of individuals – artists, promoters, collectors, and exhibitors – play a crucial role in shaping, promoting, and determining the success of art. He suggests that the public has limited influence over the art world compared to its role in shaping other cultural forms. Art decisions are largely made by a few hundred influential individuals globally. Banksy gets to the point in his train of thought that the art galleries are trophies. When visiting an art gallery, he suggests that the average person is essentially a tourist gazing at the achievements of a select group of millionaires. So, Banksy's perspective illustrates the hierarchical and exclusive nature of the art world, where a few elites hold significant influence over what is considered successful art.

## 2.2. Banksy the Mysterious Street Artist

But who is Banksy? Do we really know enough about him? Banksy, the mysterious street artist whose identity is still unknown, has achieved worldwide fame for his insightful and frequently controversial pieces. However, his artistry is not without controversy. Banksy, the pseudonymous British street artist, has captured the global art scene for decades with his thought-provoking and often politically charged works. His career is shrouded in mystery and has unfolded in parallel with the rise of street art from an underground subculture to a recognized and celebrated art form (Shove G., 2012). Banksy's origins are giving his person an aura of intrigue. His graffiti art can be traced back to the streets of Bristol, England, where he began leaving his mark in the early 1990s. His earliest works were characterized by their stenciled images and witty social commentary. Banksy's ability to communicate intensive messages through simple, visually striking designs set him apart from other street artists. According to Lewisohn (2008) Banksy fits the street-art model more than graffiti writers, thus he still makes stencils, but he has mainly other projects. As Banksy's reputation grew, his art developed into a powerful form of social and political commentary. Banksy's actions are as significant as his creations. Several memorable cases are linked to his name. For example, when he created a dystopian theme park called "Dismaland" in Weston-super-Mare, UK. The park was a satirical take on Disneyland, with dark and political themes. It attracted thousands of visitors and garnered widespread media coverage (Alleyne, 2015). Another case was when a version of Banksy's famous "Girl with a Balloon" artwork was auctioned at Sotheby's. However, moments after the winning offer was accepted, the artwork began to shred itself through a shredder hidden in the frame, leaving the audience stunned (Reyburn, 2018). His stencils and murals began appearing not only on the streets but also in galleries and museums worldwide. Banksy's art transcended traditional boundaries,

challenging societal norms and addressing pressing issues such as war, inequality, and consumerism. His works became a source of inspiration for discussions about urban art's role in contemporary society. Banksy's career has been the streets of Bristol to the global stage. Through his thought-provoking works, Banksy has not only challenged social norms but has also transformed the way we perceive and value street art. His ongoing importance shows that art can still inspire, challenge, and drive change over time (Ellsworth, 2012). Banksy's decision to hide his identity serves as a powerful statement. It allows his art to speak for itself, independent from him or his background. By choosing anonymity, Banksy shifts the focus from the artist to the art, emphasizing that the message contained within his works is more important than individual. This message is a direct challenge to the celebrity-driven culture that often dominates the art world. Anonymity helps Banksy's work resist commercialization, which he opposes with his artworks. He can maintain control over his art and its message, preventing it from becoming just another good in the art market. We can ask the question then how does Banksy make money? Banksy generates income primarily by selling prints of his artwork. While most of his art is initially sold in the primary market through auctions and direct sales, Banksy does not directly profit from these transactions. He used to sell prints through a platform called Pictures on Walls, but currently, he sells his art through Pest Control. Moreover, he makes money by selling his books, and from the self-made, Oscar nominated movie *Exit through the Gift Shop* (Sheth, 2023). A defamation case could potentially reveal Banksy's identity as he faces allegations in court. Many believe Banksy is Robin Gunningham, who is now a defendant in this case. Banksy's partner is a company called Pest Control Ltd, which sells Banksy's art using templates and continues to maintain Banksy's anonymity. Pest Control was founded by Andrew Gallagher, who recognized the financial potential of graffiti art in the 1990s. Details about the upcoming defamation case are scarce, and Banksy's identity remains a mystery. While Banksy denied being the person in the photo, he has been named Banksy in this lawsuit (Eden and Dye, 2023).

Banksy's anonymity is a deliberate choice that shifts the focus from the artist to the art itself, challenging celebrity-driven art culture. It is a form of subversion, aligning with street art's anti-establishment ethos. Anonymity has positive aspects, like emphasizing the art's message and resisting commercialization, but also negative ones, such as a lack of accountability and debates on authenticity. Overall, Banksy's hidden identity enhances the impact of his work, emphasizing that art should speak for itself, free from the artist's persona.

## 2.3. Internet Meme

Saint Hoax, a well-known meme creator describes memes as media elements repurposed to convey cultural, social, or political messages, often through humor. Memes, according to Saint Hoax, can capture current ideas that match what is happening in our culture and society (New Benveniste, 2022). It is an accurate description of the role that memes often play in contemporary digital culture. Memes have evolved beyond simple internet jokes and have become a powerful form of communication and expression.

If we look at The Britannica Dictionary, we can find two definitions. The first meaning is a meme is a cultural idea, behavior, or style piece that people copy then modify and spread from one person to another. The second meaning relates to the entertaining pictures and videos what people share on the internet. However, the term meme was originally introduced by Dawkins (2016) who first used it in 1976 in his book "The Selfish Gene". Dawkins provided an initial definition of a meme what later Shifman (2012) argued that Dawkins' definition was unclear. Dawkins described memes as either a "unit of cultural transmission" or a "unit of imitation." This process can be paralleled with the way genetic information spreads between living things. The term viral spread also refers to this. In the internet age, the term internet meme refers to

internet content that spreads rapidly and is widely shared on social media and other online platforms. All in all, these memes have some key points. They have a humorous and ironic nature. They use humor to convey messages or commentary on various subjects. Memes have media formats such as images, videos and text elements. They are not limited to a single medium. Memes can have a short lifespan, where they trend briefly and then fade away. At the same time, we can also see examples of some memes living much longer. Although this may be increasingly rare as trends appear and disappear more quickly. Also, since certain memes react to certain events in the world, as soon as these events disappear from the focus, the memes vanish with them. Memes circulate on the Internet. They are designed to spread rapidly on the web, they often go viral within online communities, and their widespread sharing contributes to their popularity. Memes come in various forms and are not always created for relatability. While some memes are relatable to specific experiences, others are more abstract or focused on humor and satire.

The Dancing Baby, which is one of the early internet memes, was a simple animated image of a dancing baby created for showcasing animation software. It gained popularity in the '90s through email chains and chat rooms, even appearing in the TV show "Ally McBeal." Another powerful meme format is the "image macro," featuring captioned pictures. Early versions, like LOLcats and Advice animal, set the stage for modern memes. Memes are like public inside jokes, evolving rapidly and catering to diverse subcultures and interests. They may not always make sense, but someone out there understands them (Willingham, 2023). According to Limor Shifman (2014) who tried to understand deeper the memes, she thought "While memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures, Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends." (p. 15) He defined Internet meme as: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users." (p. 7-8) He highlights six factors that intensify content's virality such as positivity, provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packing, prestige, and positioning. On the internet, there are two common ways people reuse memes: mimicry and remixing. Mimicry, which involves imitating others, has become very noticeable in the web 2.0 era. For example, on platforms like YouTube, when a user-generated video becomes popular, it often inspires others to make similar ones. Remixing is also widespread because digital tools make it easy to download, edit, and share content. So, people copy and modify memes a lot online (Shifman, 2014).

### 2.3.1. Political Internet Meme

Political memes are a big part of internet memes that comment on political issues, figures, or events with the use of humor, satire, or irony. These memes employ clever visuals, text, or videos to convey a political message, critique policies, or make fun of politicians. They are often shared on social media platforms and have the power to engage and mobilize public opinion, making them a significant part of contemporary political discourse. Political memes can reflect the current political and social situations, offering insights into public sentiment and contributing to the shaping of public perception on various political matters.

Shifman (2014) names three functions of political memes. Memes as forms of persuasion or political advocacy, memes as grassroots action, memes as modes of expression and public discussion. He suggests that while political memes may serve similar functions in both democratic and nondemocratic contexts, their role in nondemocratic settings can be particularly significant as a tool for democratic subversion. This means that they can be used as a form of resistance or challenge to nondemocratic regimes or authorities. He cites the Chinese example



for this. In the context of China, political memes serve as a form of democratic subversion. They enable citizens to express dissent, criticize the government, and raise awareness about sensitive issues, despite strict censorship and limited freedom of expression. Memes act as a means of challenging the status quo and providing a platform for political discourse in a nondemocratic environment. Since Chinese censorship is quite strong, these conditions have forced people who somehow want to express their opinion to use creative and seemingly harmless means. This also means the use of the Internet and the same goes for memes, which may seem to have no political significance. It can also be called a kind of hidden language, since only the members of the communities are able to understand the underlying content of each image or video. "River crab" meme is one of the most known and Shifman takes this example as well. People express their opinion about censorship with this crab and a play on words, and this turns into a popular visual meme. So, we can think that Chinese blogs, and pages do not contain sensitive political statements or expressed an opinion on sensitive issues, because of the serious censorship, but this is not true. In fact, despite the censorship, we can find expressive content in its own way, if we understand what is going on behind the surface. So, these memes are a way of self-expression and opinion on the internet. Moreover, another example is when Barack Obama's campaign stood out for its innovative and effective use of digital media. Numerous memes appear during the campaigns on the internet. Such as the "Yes We Can" music video, which incorporated Obama's speeches. It went viral and it inspired numerous parodies and remixes by the only community. "Thanks, Obama" Meme: While this meme originated during his presidency rather than his campaign, the phrase "Thanks, Obama" was used humorously to attribute various everyday inconveniences to President Obama, in a tongue-in-cheek manner. It can be declared that social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook played a significant role. Obama's approach was unique. His team recognized and accepted the power of the Internet and social media, so he was able to gain an advantage by utilizing it and was able to involve new supporters and reach voters more easily. Rather than relying solely on traditional campaign methods, his team leveraged social media to connect with voters, share his message, and encourage supporters to take various forms of action. Traditionally, political science has mainly considered easily measurable forms of participation like voting or joining political groups. However, in recent years, the definition of political participation has expanded to include everyday activities like commenting on political blogs and sharing humorous content about politicians. New media platforms provide accessible and convenient roads for encouraging participation, particularly among younger individuals who have been less engaged in formal political processes in the past. In essence, we can see how the internet and digital media have transformed the concept of political participation by making it more inclusive and accessible, allowing a wider range of people to engage in political activities beyond traditional methods like voting (Goodman, Wennerstrom, & Springgate, 2011; Shifman, 2014; Aaker and Chang, 2009).

In the past, before the era of social media, false information was a problem as well, it is not a new phenomenon. Misinformation could still spread among people. However, there is a crucial difference between the situation in the past and today. In pre-social-media times, only a limited number of organizations had the capability to reach large audiences with their content. But on social media, this changed a lot. More and more people are able to share what they want and more people can see it as before. Propaganda disguised as misinformed individual speech, now plays a much more significant role in how ideas and information are spread. According to O'Connor and Weatherall (2019) people tend to trust their friends and those they perceive as similar as themselves. The authors claim that people generally trust more the sources that they get from a family member, friend or close acquaintance, since it is much easier to believe someone, we know than unknown sources. This can easily turn into a bubble, which means that the user only encounters like-minded opinions. The problem lies in the fact that it can easily lead the recipient to wrong information. When disinformation turns into misinformation and is

shared through memes and other content by friends or peers on social media. What causes an additional problem is that if the information passes through several people, it is more difficult to trace its origin, but all this is made more difficult by the anonymity provided by the Internet. In other words, people often do not know where these misleading memes initially came from. When memes and misinformation spread from person to person, the trail becomes difficult to follow. O'Connor and Weatherall think it creates opportunities for propagandists or those spreading false information. In essence, the structure of new media platforms allows misinformation to go viral. Shifman (2014) discusses the differences between viral and memetic content and identifies factors that contribute to their success. She names three groups: those memes which are applicable to both viral and memetic content, those which are specific to viral content, and those which are specific to memetic content. Factors that apply to both viral and memetic content include simplicity, humor, and providing ways for people to participate. Simple and easily understood content is more likely to be shared and imitated. Humor enhances sharing and encourages people to imitate content. Factors that particularly relate to viral content include prestige, positioning, and evoking strong emotions. These factors align with traditional success factors for mass media. Encouraging meme-like creativity in videos and photos involves repeating ideas and presenting challenges that demand inventive solutions. For videos, repeating ideas helps with replication, while memetic potential in photos often comes from their Photoshop-like appearance.

According to Jenkins and Deuze (2008) media serves as a mediator between various elements of society, including individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, and industries. In the traditional model, individuals were primarily considered as consumers of media, rather than active contributors or participants in shaping the culture. We can see that it has already changed a lot, thus individuals now have more opportunities to participate in and influence the cultural landscape through media, blurring the lines between consumers and creators. According to Jenkins and Deuze, the changes in communication technology create both positive and negative effects within our culture. On the positive side, individuals from smaller or marginalized communities now have the tools to create and share their stories and perspectives, ensuring a diverse range of voices in the media landscape. People can access information from various sources, not just mainstream media, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of issues through different viewpoints. This democratization of media provides more opportunities for creative expression through blogs, social media, and other online platforms. However, Jenkins and Deuze highlight the negative side, large media companies are expanding their influence across various channels, dominating the media landscape and controlling much of what people see, hear, and read. These companies act as traditional gatekeepers, deciding which stories are told and how they are framed, limiting diversity and prioritizing certain agendas. Independent creators and smaller media outlets struggle to compete with the resources and reach of large media companies, limiting their influence and sustainability. This control extends beyond news to entertainment and advertising, reinforcing societal norms.

If we are talking about political internet memes, then the inevitable figure of this topic is Pepe the Frog. The internet is a vast and ever-evolving landscape, and one of its phenomena is the transformation of Pepe the Frog from a harmless comic character into a symbol associated with hate, racism, and extremism. Pepe the Frog is the creation of controversies and the ongoing efforts to reclaim its image. The character Pepe the Frog, originally created as a kind cartoon character. It was created by Matt Furie in his comic "Boys Club" in the early 2000s. Furie described Pepe as a "blissfully stoned frog-dude" with a laid-back attitude and a catchphrase, "feels good man." (Bramescio, 2020; Hess, 2016). The character was an embodiment of carefree and harmless fun, far from the sinister associations it would later gain. Pepe's transformation into a symbol of hate began when it was appropriated by various online communities, notably on platforms like 4chan and Reddit. These communities altered Pepe's image to serve their own

purposes, creating memes that promoted racism, anti-Semitism, and extremist ideologies. This marked the first step in the frog's descent into a symbol of bigotry (Bauckhage, 2011) The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) added Pepe to its list of hate symbols in 2016, along with symbols like the swastika and the Confederate flag. Furie has been on a mission to reclaim his creation. He expressed frustration at how a character meant for positivity was used for hate and bigotry. He appeared to symbolically close the chapter on the character by depicting Pepe's funeral in a comic strip. In a surprising turn of events, the ADL decided to work with Matt Furie to try and rehabilitate the image of Pepe. Together, they launched a campaign with the hashtag #SavePepe, encouraging the creation and sharing of positive Pepe memes (Milligan, 2019). This initiative highlights the power of reclamation and the importance of educating the public about symbols and their meanings. This case also underscores the importance of vigilance and awareness in the digital age, as symbols can easily shift from harmless to harmful and back again, depending on the context in which they are used. The controversy surrounding Pepe the Frog also had a positive side. During the Hong Kong protests, the frog was adopted as a symbol of pro-democracy by protesters, unaware of its darker associations elsewhere in the world. In this context, Pepe is viewed positively as a symbol of youth participation in the movement. The Hong Kong experience demonstrated the fluidity of internet symbols and their ability to adapt to different cultural contexts (Victor, 2019).

These legal victories underscore the power of creators to defend their characters and reclaim their intended meanings. The Pepe saga exemplifies the broader implications of internet culture, intellectual property, and the unpredictability of meme-driven symbols in the digital age.

## 2.4. Graffiti as Meme

The Kilroy meme, also known as "Kilroy Was Here," is a famous and enduring piece of graffiti and popular culture that originated during II World War. It typically features a simple illustration of a man with a prominent nose and fingers gripping a wall or a ledge, with the text "Kilroy Was Here" written nearby. The exact origins of the Kilroy meme are debated, but it became associated with American servicemen during World War II. Soldiers would draw the Kilroy figure on walls, vehicles, and other surfaces in various parts of the world where they were stationed. It is believed to have been a form of humorous and morale-boosting graffiti. The phrase "Kilroy Was Here" would often be accompanied by the drawing, and it became a symbol of American presence and perseverance during the war. Kilroy's image and message became widely recognized, and it continued to appear in various forms of media and pop culture long after the war ended (Whipps, 2008; Abate, 2020; Shifman, 2014). Shifman (2014) called it a veteran meme and he compared it to Internet memes due to its viral spread. Parallels can be drawn between graffiti and internet posts and comments because they both represent forms of public expression and communication. Just as graffiti artists use physical spaces to convey their messages, internet users utilize digital platforms to share their thoughts, opinions, and creativity. Both mediums offer individuals a means to engage with their surroundings, make statements, and leave a lasting impact on the public sphere, albeit in different ways. Shifman explains that there are three reasons why people recreate images that others have made. These reasons are economic, social, and cultural.

All things considered, internet memes, those catchy and shareable units of culture, have become a dominant language in modern political discourse. They range from humorous to hate-filled and have the power to influence people's beliefs. They thrive on the internet's speed and lack of gatekeepers, allowing even obscure ideas to go viral. The rise of personalized politics and meme generation challenges traditional media's control over information dissemination.

Memes are now a form of anarchic folk propaganda, used by individuals to voice their opinions and compete with traditional media. However, this democratization of content creation has a dark side. The alt-right has harnessed meme culture to promote extreme ideologies and manipulate public opinion. Memes have blurred the lines between truth and falsehood, challenging the concept of a shared reality. In a world where memes have become a form of communication, the challenge is to make the truth more plausible and restore meaningful dialogue to the digital landscape.

### 3. Methodology

The combination of Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog memes shows an interesting comparison of modern visual communication. These forms have become very popular and influential recently. Banksy's street art, known for its striking and thought-provoking imagery, has emerged as a powerful medium for conveying socio-political commentary in urban spaces. On the other hand, Pepe the Frog, originating as a harmless comic character, has transformed into a multifaceted internet meme, disseminated and modified by online communities to convey humor, satire, and even political messages. The puzzle lies in understanding the connections and distinctions between these two visual phenomena. This research emerges from the recognition of the significant roles these visual forms play in shaping public perception and social narratives. It seeks to unravel the complexities of visual communication in the digital age, where urban art and internet memes overlap, impacting public opinion and provoking discussions on critical issues. The thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of visual communication and the ways in which art, humor, and symbolism influence the collective consciousness in the digital era.

To guide this investigation, the following research questions are framed:

Q1: How do Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog function as contemporary art forms of propaganda, and what sets them apart from traditional propaganda techniques?

Q2: What are the commonalities and disparities in their strategies, impact, and effectiveness in shaping public opinion?

These research questions underpin the chosen methodology, steering us toward a qualitative comparative analysis and a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. This research design allows for an in-depth examination of Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog, facilitating the identification of unique attributes distinguishing them from traditional propaganda. Additionally, it enables a side-by-side comparison to explore their shared characteristics and differences in influencing public opinion. This research operates on the assumption that there exists a significant and nuanced connection between Banksy's street graffiti, displayed in the physical world, and the internet phenomenon of Pepe the Frog. It is hypothesized that both visual forms, while distinct in their mediums, share common elements in their ability to act as contemporary forms of propaganda. This assumption serves as a foundational premise for the investigation into the roles and impact of Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog as propagandistic influence, ultimately seeking to discern the extent to which these two forms of visual communication influence public perception, beliefs, and social commentary.

#### 3.1. Theoretical Framework

Visual communication theory is one of the cores of the thesis. This theory forms the cornerstone of the theoretical framework. It is instrumental in understanding how visual elements convey meaning and shape perception. Banksy's street art is renowned for its striking visual language, characterized by powerful imagery and symbolism. Each mural, stencil, or installation tells a

story and delivers a message that resonates across a wide spectrum of society. Visual communication theory helps us interpret how Banksy employs this language to communicate socio-political narratives. It provides a framework for understanding how his use of aesthetics, symbolism, and juxtaposition influences public perception, sparking conversations on issues that demand societal attention. Pepe the Frog, as an internet meme, operates within a digital area that escalates on visual elements. Visual communication theory, in this context, allows us to explore how the various iterations of Pepe memes harness visual symbols to convey messages, often with humor and irony. Understanding the visual cues and references used in Pepe memes aids in recognizing their propagandistic features.

Another crucial component of the theoretical framework, propaganda theory, delves into the art of persuasion and the techniques employed to influence individuals and groups. Banksy's street art often contains emotional appeals and political messaging intertwined with visual elements. The theory of propaganda provides insights into how Banksy's work elicits emotional responses, challenges existing beliefs, and calls attention to social and political issues. By grounding the analysis in propaganda theory, we can recognize how Banksy uses propaganda techniques to provoke thought and discourse. The study of Pepe the Frog, a versatile internet meme, within the purview of propaganda theory, unveils its role as a contemporary form of propaganda. While Pepe memes are often playful, they carry subtle, sometimes subversive, messages. Propaganda theory helps in uncovering the persuasive tactics used within these memes. It helps us understand how Pepe memes influence attitudes and opinions within online communities and contribute to shaping the narratives surrounding various issues.

Within the theoretical framework, semiotics emerges as a lens for analyzing the visual elements of Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation, is instrumental in decoding the meaning behind visual elements. In the context of Banksy's street art, this theory aids in the decoding of symbols, metaphors, and allegorical representations within his works. Pepe the Frog, as a meme, operates with a set of visual symbols and expressions.

## 3.2. Rationale for the Method

The selected method, qualitative comparative analysis, aligns with the theoretical framework and is chosen for several reasons:

**In-Depth Exploration:** Qualitative comparative analysis is like digging deep into the details of Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog. It helps us break down and closely examine the visual and persuasive aspects of these forms. This method allows us to get a more detailed and subtle understanding of these types of visual communication.

**Comparative Approach:** The method's emphasis on comparison perfectly complements the research's objectives. It enables the examination of the unique characteristics and shared attributes of Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog in the realm of propaganda.

**Contextual Exploration:** The chosen method accommodates a contextual exploration, crucial for understanding the socio-political commentaries embedded within Banksy's art and Pepe the Frog. It considers the contextual influences that enrich the interpretation of these artworks.

The selected subjects will be analyzed according to the following points.

**Identifying Key Themes or Messages:** Each artwork thoughtfully selected to align with specific research objectives, diving into themes of innocence, rebellion, optimism, and contrasting emotions.

Visual Elements Analysis: The analysis centers on assessing the use of color, symbolism, composition, and style within each pair, aiming to understand how visual elements convey emotions and messages.

Emotional Analysis: We explore how Banksy's graffiti and Pepe memes leverage visual cues to convey emotions like sadness, anger and hope with a keen eye on their impact on the audience.

Thematic Analysis: Socio-political, cultural, and satirical themes are dissected within each piece to grasp how each form of visual communication communicates these themes through artistic elements.

Message Conveyance and Impact: The analysis examines how effectively each medium conveys intended messages and influences public opinion or societal discourse.

Conclusion of Comparison: Each comparison concludes with a summary of key findings, offering insights into addressing the research questions and objectives. The findings provide a perspective, shedding light on common trends, unique elements, and the broader implications of the comparative analysis.

## 4. Banksy's Graffiti

### 4.1. Style and Technique

Banksy's street art is known for his rebellious style and sharp social observations, his art goes beyond traditional artistic limits. His graffiti disrupts city spaces with compelling visuals that question societal norms and challenge established power dynamics. The question of why Banksy persists with stencils finds an answer in their rebellious nature. According to "Master of The Stencil: How does Banksy Make His Art?" on My Art Broker website, beyond practical advantages, stenciling allows for speed, anonymity, and clear, impactful messages, aligning with Banksy's unconventional approach. Critics may question this choice, but Banksy's stencils contribute to an art form that is egalitarian, politically vocal, and visually arresting—a deliberate departure from conventional norms. However, the use of stencil technique is not unique to Banksy's art, many graffiti artists turn to this technique as it offers numerous advantages. Stenciling serves a twofold purpose – it helps him maintain anonymity, crucial for his often-illegal art, and ensures the widespread sharing of his messages. Banksy's art style is closely tied to the funny and critical messages in his work. With his graffiti, he visually comments on social and political issues, sharply criticizing what is happening today. Whether he is making fun of politicians, questioning the rightness of war, or pointing out unfairness in society. Banksy's humor makes people think and talk. His skill in turning complicated ideas into easy-to-understand pictures has made a lot of people like his work. Even we can question it if we really understand it.

Urban integration is another key element of Banksy's graffiti style. Rather than confining his art to traditional gallery spaces, Banksy chooses to engage with the urban environment itself. By strategically placing his works on buildings, bridges, and walls, Banksy uses urban areas for public reflection. In other words, Banksy puts his art in cities for everyone to see and think about. This breaks the idea that art is only for special places like galleries, making it part of people's everyday experiences, even if they never go to an art show or exhibition. This is also why some people question, if this is art, why it colors the streets and why they are not in the galleries. My Art Broker article moreover analyzes Banksy's style and talks about Banksy's use of color and contrast further amplifies the impact of his art. Often favoring a limited color palette dominated by black and white, monochrome colors, Banksy employs contrast to emphasize key elements of his compositions. The deliberate use of color draws the viewer's attention, directing

focus towards the central messages conveyed in each piece.

Another characteristic of Banksy is that he heavily relies on symbols, combining popular cultural icons and certain symbols to form new meanings and manipulate public perception. He uses cultural and religious symbols to address ethical problems, such as criticizing consumerism. Symbols are not only present in his works but also constructed through the moment or placement of the artwork. Beyond the visual aesthetics, Banksy's graffiti style is a form of activism. His work serves as a visual protest of established power structures and social norms. Wicaksono (2020) deals with the phenomena "postesthetic". It is intriguing to see how the longstanding belief in the importance of beauty, which has been held for centuries, has now essentially crumbled or fallen apart on its own. Wicaksono agrees that Banksy's postesthetic approach generates debates, especially when dealing with ethical contexts. He highlights the potential misunderstandings in conservative or eastern societies due to sensitive images, it cause uncomfortable feelings in the viewer. Ethical values, although seemingly ignored at a visual level, are essentially part of the postesthetic approach, challenging. Banksy's art becomes a vehicle for dissent, a tool to inspire collective questioning and resistance. Banksy's graffiti style is not confined to the streets; it extends into the realm of public interventions. The artist's brave moves, like putting up art stalls without permission in public places, shake up the way art is bought and sold, and they mess with how the traditional art scene works. These interventions blur the lines between artist and audience, further emphasizing Banksy's commitment to making art accessible to all. The combination of stencils, satirical themes, urban integration, and activism creates a unique artistic language that resonates globally. Banksy's graffiti challenges not only the way we perceive art but also our understanding of the societal structures that govern our lives. We interpret his works on their own, such as the girl hugging a bomb or the depiction of a homosexual police couple. Both can stand alone in interpretation, yet at the same time, they fit into a larger context. Alternatively, we might consider that war is bad; however, if we know the stories behind the images, we can precisely understand that, for example, the figure throwing flowers is graffiti located in Palestine. The graffiti, on its own, speaks about the negativity of war, but it originated from the situation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

In the following, I will not only analyze the appearance of graffiti, but also the history of graffiti, since this is also important from the point of view of the analysis, to get closer to understanding the works and to have the big picture.

## 4.2. Anti-War Art

Banksy strongly opposes war, violence, and inequality, making his views clear in his artworks. The website Banksy Explained in their article, they refer to him as Unofficial War Artist. The article describes his art as often mocking political elites, such as punk portrayals of wartime leaders or controversial images like "Monkey Queen," depicting Queen Elizabeth as a monkey. Banksy's art uses symbols of peace contrasted with violent or menacing elements to convey powerful messages. Universal symbols like peace signs, flowers, and smiley faces are juxtaposed with military figures, emphasizing the contradictions between peace and conflict.

### 4.2.1. Israel-Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rooted in historical, political, and territorial disputes, has persisted for decades, resulting in deep-seated animosity and ongoing tensions. Banksy's engagement with this conflict through street art reflects his commitment to using art as a form of social and political commentary. One of Banksy's notable works in the region is the mural on

the Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem. This piece depicts a figure caught between two opposing forces, symbolizing the struggle faced by those living amidst conflict. The use of a neutral, faceless figure invites viewers to project their own experiences onto the artwork, fostering empathy. The hotel has nine rooms, one of which is named Banksy's Room. This room gained fame because of one of his graffiti artworks, the painting shows an Israeli borderpoliceman and a Palestinian man. However, his action has sparked polarized opinions. While some criticize it for being inconsiderate to the daily struggles of the local population and undermining the cause, others see it as a boost to the economy and an international statement against the state of Israel (Hamade, 2022; Qena, 2017).



*Figure 4.1 Pillow Fight*

Banksy has also created impactful murals in the Gaza Strip, an area deeply affected by the conflict. One notable piece portrays a kitten playing with a ball of metal debris, juxtaposing innocence with the harsh realities of conflict. The juxtaposition serves as a poignant commentary on the resilience of life amid adversity. The artist made a film, called "Make this year YOU discover a new destination". The video creates a surreal feeling in the viewer while watching the playing children among the destroyed buildings and Banksy's artworks. One local in the video comments on the kitten graffiti as: "This cat tells the whole world that she is missing joy in her life. The cat found something to play with. What about our children?" (Beaumont-Thomas, 2015).



*Figure 4.2 Kitten*

Another iconic image is Banksy's "The Flower Thrower," featuring a man in rioter stance throwing a bunch of flowers instead of a Molotov cocktail. This piece challenges the narrative of aggression by presenting a peaceful gesture in the face of conflict. It calls for a reconsideration of how individuals express dissent. It can be seen as a form of positive activism. "Flower Thrower" is a visually striking and symbolically rich piece that invites viewers to reconsider



their perspectives on conflict, encouraging a shift from aggression to peaceful resistance.



*Figure 4.3 Flower Thrower*

Stance (n.d.) highlights the importance of one of the pieces called Armored Dove on a Palestinian Heritage Center. The magazine refers to it as a thought-provoking take on the Israel-Palestine conflict, reminiscent of Picasso's Guernica. In art, the white dove usually symbolizes peace, in Guernica a stabbed dove appears. This symbol shows the horrors of war and violence. We see a similar representation in Banksy's work. Figure 4 shows the dove. Armored Dove depicts a dove with an olive branch, and it is wearing an armored vest with a target on its chest. This artwork makes a strong statement about the challenges of achieving peace in a conflict-ridden context. Banksy's art humanizes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by focusing on the individuals affected rather than the political entities involved. This approach allows viewers to connect emotionally with the subjects of the artwork, fostering a deeper understanding of the human cost of the conflict. Banksy's graffiti challenges authority and questions power dynamics. By strategically placing his works in locations laden with political significance, he asserts a form of protest against the status quo. The act of reclaiming public spaces through art challenges the dominant narrative and stimulates conversations. Banksy employs symbolism and metaphor to convey messages. The use of everyday symbols, such as flowers and kittens, transforms the political discourse into a more relatable and accessible narrative. This strategy encourages viewers to reflect on the shared human experience rather than focusing solely on the geopolitical complexities. Banksy goes beyond creating art; he actively raises funds for charitable causes (Banksy Explained, n.d.; World of Banksy, n.d.).



*Figure 4.4 Armored Dove*

### 4.3. Rats in Banksy's Art

My Art Broker highlights the fact that rats hold a central role in Banksy's art, leading some to speculate that 'rat' being an anagram of 'art' adds a clever layer. However, Banksy revealed in his book, *Wall and Piece*, that the anagram discovery was not intentional. Banksy often uses rats to symbolize different aspects of political and social issues. In his work, rats can represent street artists like himself, rebellious individuals, people who are marginalized or overlooked by society, and those who feel rejected by mainstream culture. In his words, "Rats exist without permission. They are hated, hunted and persecuted... yet they are capable of bringing entire civilizations to their knees." (Banksy, 2005).

Although Banksy frequently incorporates rat imagery into his prints and graffiti, there has not been an original artwork featuring rats in a non-street setting. Rats continue to symbolize the rebellious nature of the street artist, serving as a symbol of defiance against authority, both through their ubiquity and their symbolic significance. This explains why Banksy's stenciled street rats have appeared in numerous locations visited by the artist over the years, becoming a recurring motif in his work. Rats, often associated with negative connotations in urban settings, become even more symbolic for graffiti artists connected with vandalism, projecting the rat symbol onto themselves. My Art Broker website's article "10 Facts About Banksy's Rats" and the Banksy Explained article "Radar Rat", help us to understand more about the phenomenon of rats. The articles draw a parallel between two artists. Banksy faced accusations of copying another graffiti artist, Blek le Rat (Xavier Prou) who responded by disagreeing with the notion of being copied, emphasizing that the rat is a symbol popular among artists. Blek le Rat, in his art, expresses the idea that rats are the animals that thrive in urban environments, and if humans were to vanish, rats would persist. He intended to launch a rat invasion through graffiti on the streets of Paris. While the rat analogy is not his invention, as it has appeared in previous artistic works, he was unique in bringing rats to the walls of the streets through his graffiti. Banksy's view about this topic is that it is almost impossible to make something original and even if he thinks he made something new, he must realize someone else has already done it before him. The two artists speak respectfully of each other, and it is only the critics who have tried to find fault with Banksy. Indeed, the motif of rats appears multiple times and in various ways endowed with human characteristics in Banksy's art. Most rats have their own story, what they represent.

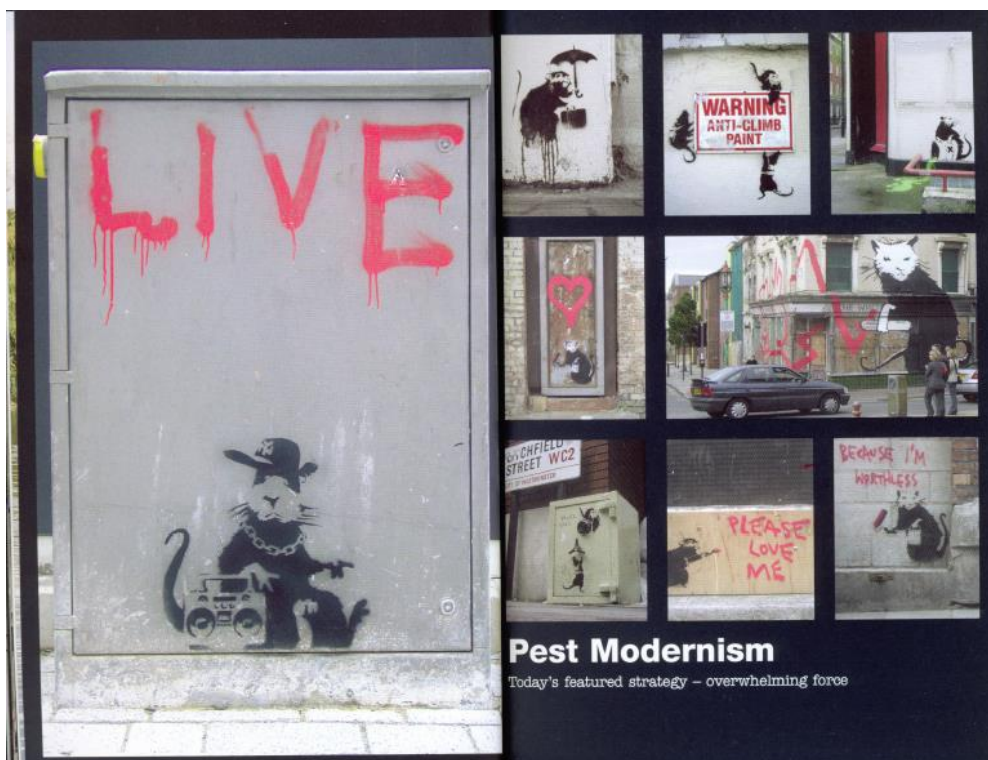


Figure 4.5 It Cut Out

We can see an evolution in his artwork. The iconic rat, synonymous with Banksy, has undergone a striking transformation—from a simple street stencil to a potent symbol of rebellion and social commentary. Originating in the early 2000s on London and Bristol walls, these rats, often depicted with a paintbrush, went beyond aesthetics; they embodied Banksy's traits of invisibility, omnipresence, and prank, becoming early symbols of rebellion (Figure 4.5). Over time, Banksy's rats evolved into complex forms with nuanced meanings, carrying placards bearing thought-provoking messages. Examples like 'Rat with A Camera' (2004) critiqued surveillance culture, and 'Rat with A Drill' (2003) symbolized civil disobedience, shifting from passive observers to active participants in societal discourse. Banksy's intentional use of the rat as a metaphor is significant. While rats are seen as pests, they also symbolize resilience in harsh environments. Aligning with this creature, Banksy suggests he, like the rat, is a survivor navigating societal pressures. Rebellion is not always overt. Beyond a symbol, Banksy's rat becomes a voice for those challenging the status quo, showcasing the influence of street art on societal discourse (Canvas Prints Australia, 2023).



Figure 4.6 Rat Mural in London

### 4.3.1. Gangsta Rat And Symbolic meanings

Gangsta Rat was replicated as murals in Farrington in 2004, Old Street in 2006, and New York City in 2013 (My Art Broker, n.d.). It was fitting for Gangsta Rat to be featured in Banksy's New York residency, *Better Out Than In*. New York City is often dubbed the unofficial rat capital of the world. Banksy introduced exclusive color variations of the Gangsta Rat print: blue, pink, yellow, orange, gray, green. This marked the inaugural occasion when Banksy released a print in multiple colorways, a trend he would later continue with *Choose Your Weapon* in 2010. *Placard Rats* were unveiled in 2003 in the form of three distinct screen-print editions: *Welcome To Hell*, *Get Out While You Can*, and *Because I'm Worthless*.



*Figure 4.7 Welcome to Hell*

The rat series by Banksy serves as a sharp commentary on societal norms and the pursuit of personal freedom. According to *Because I'm Worthless* article (Banksy Explained, n.d.), the inspiration was George Marshall's book (2011) "*Get Out While You Can, Escape the Rat Race*". Each print within the series features a rat, anthropomorphized as it stands on its hind feet, a posture reminiscent of humans. By giving human attributes to these creatures, Banksy prompts contemplation on the struggle for autonomy and the desire to break free from the constraints of conventional expectations, echoing the themes prevalent in Marshall's work. What distinguishes these prints is the compelling symbolism embodied by the rat holding placards adorned with bright red or pink script. The choice of portraying rats in an upright stance and assigning them the role of protesters with placards is a deliberate artistic decision. It serves as a metaphorical representation of individuals seeking liberation from the metaphorical "rat race" or the societal constructs that confine them. Banksy, likening himself to a working-class individual confined like a rat in a cage, possibly sees parallels between his own actions and those of a rat stealing attention and creating street art under the cover of night. In addition to serving as a reflection of society, the depiction of rats symbolizes the voice of the voiceless individuals who are marginalized and ignored by society. Rats are recognized for their capacity to endure challenging environments, serving as a symbol of resilience that parallels the hardships faced by the underprivileged. The vivid color of the script on the placards contrasts sharply with the urban grayness often associated with rats, adding a layer of visual impact to the message. The rat series stands as a testament to Banksy's ability to merge visual artistry with thought-provoking narratives, inviting audiences to reconsider their positions within the larger societal framework.

Banksy's *Parachuting Rat* is a symbolic representation that draws a parallel between the rat's unexpected appearance with a parachute and the spontaneous nature of graffiti on urban walls. It captures the essence of surprise, intervention, and the unanticipated impact that street art can

have on the cityscape, reflecting Banksy's penchant for using unconventional means to convey his artistic messages (Canvas Print Australia, 2023).

### 4.3.2. Impact of Banksy's Rat

Banksy's iconic rat has significantly influenced contemporary art and sparked varied responses worldwide. A symbol of rebellion, it has inspired artists globally, infiltrating commercial art. The public received and reacted to these works in many ways. There were those who accepted and agreed or understood the message. As a result, many artists could identify with this message of mine, which was symbolized by the rats. People who are relegated to the background or receive negative discrimination. While others only judged Banksy's works as vandalism. In cities and minds, it stands as a potent symbol—a graffiti rebellion, political critique, and mirror reflecting society's struggles. (Canvas Print Australia, 2023).

In summary, we can say that Banksy's iconic Rat is not just a symbol of rebellion. It is a disruptive influence in the art world, challenging norms and defying the status quo. Found in numerous global pieces, the Rat mirrors Banksy's elusive and rebellious persona, thriving in the shadows. This little creature's disruptive power unfolds in various ways. It symbolizes accessibility, Banksy's Rat challenges art elitism, bringing it to the streets for universal appreciation. With witty messages, the Rat disrupts the norm of silent art, using its platform for poignant societal commentary. Representing Banksy's graffiti art, the Rat challenges legal boundaries, pushing the limits of acceptability.

## 4.4. Capitalism in Graffiti

Capitalism is a recurring subject in his creations. Banksy's works also explore the commodification of identity in a capitalist society. The artist questions how capitalism influences and often distorts personal identity, turning individuals into mere consumers. In addition to the anti-war and rat-themed graffiti discussed earlier, we will now delve into various wall writings where the primary driving force is capitalism, analyzing Banksy's perspectives on this matter. Many of Banksy's works and symbols can be said to strongly criticize the idea of capitalism. Even the representation of rats is a strong symbol for this, but even more so, he expresses his strong opinion with his divisive works. He writes about capitalism in a sarcastic way, in his book *Banging Your Head Against a Brick Wall* (2001), "We can't do anything to change the world until capitalism crumbles. In the meantime, we should all go shopping to console ourselves."

### 4.5.1. Banksy's Symbolism of Consumer Society Through Shopping Trolleys

Banksy frequently employs the shopping cart or trolley as a strong symbol in his art, using it to convey critical messages about consumer society, societal values, and the consequences of mass consumption. The shopping cart, a common fixture in modern shopping, becomes a visual tool for Banksy's reflections on contemporary issues. While the specific messages may vary, the overarching theme involves a thoughtful examination of consumer-driven behaviors and their broader impact. One notable artwork, "Trolleys" or "Trolley Hunters" satirically underscores the influence of consumerism on self-sufficiency. In this piece, three cavemen armed with primitive weapons are depicted hunting a shopping trolley instead of traditional prey. Banksy cleverly mocks society's dependence on large supermarkets for survival, highlighting the lack of common sense in targeting the vessel for goods rather than the goods themselves. The scene serves as a humorous commentary on the fierce competition for resources, reminiscent of apocalyptic scenarios or chaotic Black Friday rushes, but perhaps we even do not have to go that far, and we can see an average day in the print. This recurring image of the shopping trolley, also found in works like "Shop till You Drop" and "Peckham Rock," symbolizes humanity's



vulnerability and the fragility of a system that is both a threat and easily visible. Banksy criticizes Western societies for how much they rely on mass-market commercialism, pointing out the irony of considering capitalism as the only viable way of life.



*Figure 4.8 Trolley Hunters*

Another activist event is associated with these works; we can glean insights from My Art Broker. It is noticeable that most of his works are associated with some interesting events, which makes his entire art even more symbolic, and these actions further involve the average person in his creations. Perhaps the intrigue of Banksy lies in this as well, that his work is not just about his graffiti being visible on the streets or in exhibitions. These activities make his work even more divisive. Banksy placed a fake cave painting featuring a man pushing a trolley among the exhibits at the British Museum in London. “10 Facts About Banksy’s Trolley” on My Art Broker shows the fact that the artwork was crafted with a black marker on stone, the artwork went unnoticed for three days until Banksy revealed the prank on Twitter. Thirteen years later, the same cave painting became part of the British Museum's exhibition on global dissent and protest history. Additionally, Banksy's counterfeit currency, the Di-Faced Tenner, found its way into the British Museum's Coins and Medals Department in 2019. These instances showcase Banksy's ability to blend satire, social commentary, and clever pranks to challenge societal norms and perceptions. He added a little comment to this act. He stated this in one of his books: “My sister threw away loads of my drawings when I was a kid and when I asked her where they were she shrugged and said, ‘Well it’s not like they’re ever gonna be hanging in the Louvre is it?’ (Banksy, 2004). This can also be interpreted as a kind of prank, that one way or another, his creation got out with these actions. It is as if Banksy wants to show that he can do this if he really wants to do it.

Furthermore, Banksy Explained highlights other aspects in the article “Graffiti, Consumerism and Capitalism”. The article explains that Banksy's Show Me the Monet cleverly reimagines Claude Monet's famous water lily pond scene. In this reinterpretation, Banksy introduces two abandoned shopping trolleys into the serene backdrop, challenging the romanticized notions linked to Monet's masterpiece. The title itself, a play on words, suggests the nuanced nature of Banksy's message. By juxtaposing the peaceful Japanese footbridge with a realistically depicted orange traffic cone and textured shopping trolley, Banksy disrupts the calm Impressionist setting. Show Me the Monet evolves into a modern discourse on the environmental repercussions of corporate dominance and the compromises made in the name of perceived human progress. This also creates the feeling that something has entered nature that does not really belong there. Through humor and irony, Banksy compels viewers to confront a potent critique of our current landscape and its often-disregarded drawbacks (Banksy Explained, n.p.)



*Figure 4.9 Show Me the Monet*

#### 4.5.2. Banksy's Satirical Commentary on Religion and Consumer Culture

The articles as “Christ with Shopping Bag” on My Art Broker and “Graffiti, Consumerism and Capitalism” on Banksy Explained give some interesting points of view. They analyze some pieces of art from Banksy, such as Christ with Shopping Bags and Sale Ends. Banksy's print "Christ with Shopping Bags," also recognized as Consumer Jesus, emerges as a bold and contentious artwork, openly expressing anti-religious sentiments. Despite its absence from the streets, its limited-edition status adds to its allure. The piece offers a distinctive perspective on the crucifixion, substituting the traditional cross and nails with shopping bags dripping black blood, containing unsettling Christmas gifts like candy canes and Mickey Mouse. Banksy's satirical approach dissects the commercialization of Christmas, particularly influenced by modern America. This intentional distortion of Christian values provides a striking commentary on the decay of principles “such as charity, compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude” (Banksy Explained, n.d.), eliciting discomfort among viewers. By challenging societal norms, Jesus Christ burdened by shopping bags symbolizes the harmful impact of consumerism on the core tenets of Christianity. Banksy strategically employs motifs like melting gifts to express the fleeting nature of modern Christmas, suggesting a trade-off between genuine happiness and transient material joy. The gray background and muted colors heighten the critique, constructing an ominous atmosphere that effectively conveys Banksy's message about the shallowness inherent in contemporary Christmas celebrations.



*Figure 4.10 Christ with Shopping Bags*

Banksy's artwork "Sale Ends" offers a poignant commentary on society's fervent consumerism, drawing parallels to religious passion. It portrays followers lamenting Jesus's crucifixion. Adopting Banksy's signature black and white stencil style, the print cleverly incorporates details reminiscent of Renaissance and Old Masters-style religious paintings. In this artwork, four women, adorned in long, flowing robes, gather around a central red sign proclaiming, "Sale Ends Today." The juxtaposition of classical religious imagery with symbols of capitalism is a testament to Banksy's satirical approach. Rendered in Banksy's characteristic style against a white backdrop, the figures' gestures and expressive faces echo the lamenting figures found in Renaissance depictions of the crucifixion. However, Banksy replaces the traditional cross with a lively red sign bearing the words 'SALE ENDS TODAY' in large white letters. This substitution serves as a pointed critique of our materialistic society, emphasizing our almost religious devotion to consumerist culture. The use of familiar shop sign aesthetics underscores the work's commentary on attention-grabbing marketing tactics, encouraging people to buy items they may not truly need. Laden with Banksy's trademark wit, "Sale Ends" seamlessly combines classical artistic elements with a contemporary satirical edge, prompting viewers to reflect on the societal implications of our consumer-driven culture (My Art Broker, n.d.; Banksy Explained, n.d.)



*Figure 4.11 Sales Ends Today*



### 4.5.3. Multinational Chains

Banksy's print "Very Little Helps," also known as "Tesco Flag," stands as a sharp critique of the spread presence of the major British supermarket chain Tesco, created during the 2007-2008 financial crisis. The artwork portrays three children raising a Tesco-branded plastic carrier bag on a flagpole, mimicking the salute to a national emblem. By playfully subverting Tesco's slogan "Every Little Helps," Banksy highlights the detrimental effects of multinational corporations on small businesses and underscores the limited choices available to the working class. The use of a flag motif further amplifies Banksy's criticism of corporations, likening them to 'new nation states' with significant societal influence. Originally a mural in London, the piece gained attention, leading to vandalism and discussions. The question arises again whether it is art. Banksy's exploration of Tesco extends to another artwork, "Tesco Value Soup Can," a pastiche of Andy Warhol's iconic Campbell's Soup Can paintings. Here, Banksy critiques Tesco's impact on working-class life and consumer culture, drawing parallels to Warhol's exploration of American affluence. Exhibited alongside other iconoclastic art-historical pastiches, the painting exemplifies Banksy's subversion of established art-world customs, echoing Warhol's transformative approach to consumer products. In both pieces, Banksy's keen commentary goes beyond traditional art boundaries, addressing socio-economic issues, consumerism, and the influence of corporate entities on contemporary culture. "Very Little Helps" reflects on the erosion of diversity and independence, while "Tesco Value Soup Can" offers a poignant critique of austerity and the transformation of consumer symbols in the twenty-first century. Through these artworks, Banksy navigates the intersection of art, commerce, and societal values, leaving viewers with thought-provoking reflections on the state of the modern world (My Art Broker, n.d.).



Figure 4.12 *Very Little Helps*

Banksy's "Napalm," also known as "Can't Beat That Feeling," is a powerful and thought-provoking reimagining of Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph "The Terror Of War" from June 8, 1972. Ut's original photograph captured the harrowing aftermath of a napalm attack in a Vietnamese village, featuring a young girl named Phan Thi Kim Phuc running in agony, her body severely burned. In Banksy's reinterpretation, Phan Thi Kim Phuc is at the center, flanked by the iconic corporate mascots, Ronald McDonald and Mickey Mouse with sinister smiles on their faces. The striking contrast between the distress on Kim Phuc's face and the trademark grins of these corporate symbols raises profound questions about the role of American consumer culture amid human suffering. The title "Can't Beat That Feeling" introduces ambiguity,

prompting viewers to contemplate whether the feeling refers to the joyous expressions of the corporate mascots or the intense agony experienced by Kim Phuc. The artwork serves as a scathing critique of capitalism's impact on society, especially on vulnerable populations like children. Banksy's commentary on the socio-political issues of power, violence, and national identity. He prompts a reflection on the intersection of capitalism, corporate influence, and the human cost of these powerful entities (My Art Broker, Christ with Shopping Bags). Therefore, we observe in these instances that Banksy occasionally remixes or alludes to previous artworks, or even integrates them into his own creations.



*Figure 4.13 Napalm*

Moreover, Banksy's street art serves as a sharp example of the ongoing struggle between capitalism and its critics. Despite addressing political and satirical themes, Banksy's works often become commodified, removed from public spaces, and sold for significant profits.

Even attempts to disrupt capitalist practices, such as the self-destructing auctioned artwork, inadvertently contribute to its commodification. The lesson drawn is the pervasive influence of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, resisting attempts to escape its grasp. The question arises whether genuine alternatives, resistant to capitalist motives, can emerge amid societal crises and transformations. The open issue explores potential answers, contemplating the reclamation of the commons and the reconfiguration of creativity and imagination as means to disrupt capitalism, at least locally and temporarily. The theoretical discussion delves into the intricate dynamics of “being, becoming, solidity, liquefaction, power, counter-power, and critique” within work relations, organizational forms, and society (Butler and Locker, 2021, pp. 5)

## 4.6. Visual Communication

According to Sivonen (2021), Banksy interacts with art history by adding his own themes to old paintings he finds at flea markets or reproductions. By doing this, he comments on both old and new artworks, becoming part of the ongoing story of visual arts. Classical art institutions have not always acknowledged Banksy's importance, and the art world has not fully accepted his work. This is common in art history; artists who challenge and change established practices often take longer to gain acceptance and serious recognition. Moreover, Sivonen sees him as Banksy expresses mixed feelings about the popularity of his work. Banksy points out that throughout history, many artists were only recognized as geniuses after they had died. This makes him worry that perhaps he is not as talented as people think. Despite his fame, he wonders if his work will truly be appreciated for its artistic value in the long run. This candid admission suggests a deeper uncertainty about the relationship between fame and genuine artistic merit.

In the realm of contemporary art, Banksy stands out as a provocateur, challenging conventions and elevating the streets to a canvas of social commentary. What distinguishes Banksy's graffiti

from classical art forms is not only its unconventional setting but also the fact that it exists on an open canvas where anyone, legally or not, can add, change, or even destroy these public artworks. This characteristic of unrestricted expression, though seemingly chaotic, contributes to the beauty and essence of open communication. Graffiti is seen as a tool for individuals with their own agenda, focused on exposure through guerrilla tactics. The conclusion suggests that advertising and graffiti share common ground in terms of seeking attention and penetration, even though they operate in different leagues—commercial profit for advertising and individual expression for graffiti.

Graffiti and advertising share a common purpose: both aim to capture people's attention and convey messages. Advertising, typically used by powerful groups, promotes their interests and upholds existing social norms, often by selling certain lifestyles and identities to the public. Graffiti, on the other hand, is seen as a means of personal expression, using unconventional and spontaneous methods to gain visibility. In fact, Banksy also questions the fact that advertisements also create and shape the image of the city, so why is it accepted while graffiti is not? Banksy's decision to create art on public walls breaks down the barriers of exclusivity that often surround traditional galleries. By taking his art to the streets, Banksy democratizes access to artistic expression, in this way people can participate in his art. The open invitation for anyone to contribute or alter the graffiti creates a living dialogue that reflects the diverse voices within a community. The act of allowing anyone to add, change, or destroy Banksy's graffiti also challenges the traditional notions of authorship and ownership in art. While this might be disconcerting for those who view art as a precious commodity, it aligns with the idea that art should be a collective experience rather than a possession. This openness to transformation underscores the transient nature of expression, emphasizing the process over the product. Furthermore, the inevitable impermanence of street art fosters a sense of impermanence in ideas as well. The open canvas invites a continuous cycle of creation and destruction, mirroring the evolution of thoughts and perspectives in a community. Banksy's works are diverse, open to interpretation in various ways, ranging from the simple to the more layered. At times, we can observe not only political or social references in his creations but also allusions to other artists. Such example his panda graffiti, which involves a transformation of another artist's work with some minor adjustments. The original piece, "Bad Panda", is the creation of Julien d'Andon. Banksy infused this depiction by adding a pipe to the panda's mouth and inscribing the words: "This is not a Banksy" to the image. The pipe and this text simultaneously allude to another artwork, namely Margitte's "The Treachery of Images". However, this example is not just a perfect illustration of intertextuality. The story of the panda vividly reflects how the graffiti found on the streets can initiate a creation form of communication. It also highlights how a particular piece of art can easily undergo transformation or acquire additional meaning. The piece challenges the certainty of identifying a work as a "Banksy" and questions the commodified notion of a Banksy as an object. The example of a scrawled message, "Take me to America," above the panda's head reflects the socio-economic context of the neighborhood. The passage emphasizes the material engagement of viewers with the work, showcasing their active interpretation and contribution to the ongoing conversation around the art. Modifications to the stencil, like a question mark or political slogan, further demonstrate the public's capacity for active interpretation and engagement with street art (Hansen, S., & Flynn, D., 2016).

The enigmatic street artist Banksy has long been a provocative figure in the art world, challenging traditional notions of artistic expression and institutional legitimacy. His elusive identity and subversive works have captivated audiences worldwide, prompting both admiration and controversy. In the summer of 2020, the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, the exhibition "Banksy, the art of visual eloquence", provided a platform for an exploration of Banksy's artistry in an exhibition that sought to unravel the complexities of his oeuvre. By delving into the themes and insights presented at this exhibition, we can gain a deeper understanding of Banksy's art

and its profound impact on contemporary discourse. The exhibition talked about how to evoke emotions using only visuals, an artist must master visual communication skills. They need to deeply understand what their audience values to elicit a response—initially jolting them, but ultimately drawing them in or creating a sense of connection with the underlying meanings. Mere public acceptance is not sufficient; there must be deliberate tension, prompting viewers to question their own identity or concerns. A common tactic involves shocking viewers while also aligning with them against a common target—a vague "enemy" like capitalism or the state apparatus, which includes the military and police. Themes of injustice are particularly effective, as they consistently resonate with audiences. Since abstract concepts cannot be directly depicted visually, it is effective to hint at them through events or narratives. This approach, often used by activists and journalists, turns a shocking but isolated incident into a symbol of larger systemic issues, providing enduring evidence. Induction, a cognitive shortcut, becomes the primary tool for images to navigate the space between concrete facts and abstract ideas.

Banksy, along with graphic artist Shepard Fairey, operates as a producer of pervasive art, engaging in commercial-scale manufacturing and widespread distribution of images that evolve into products, including derivative items like T-shirts. Fairey, known as OBEY, stands out due to his formal education at the Rhode Island School of Design, reflecting a more sophisticated reference base. In a manifesto he is aiming to unveil obscured aspects of reality through stickers and posters, challenging observers to reinterpret their surroundings. According to the exhibition in Ferrara, this passage shows how Banksy's art challenges our perception of reality. While political stencils have been used throughout history as a form of protest, Banksy takes a different approach. Instead of straightforward messages, he presents his ideas in a way that requires interpretation, much like political caricatures. By infusing his works with humor and sarcasm, Banksy invites viewers to engage with multiple layers of meaning, encouraging them to reflect on the deeper significance of his art. As discussed in "Banksy, the art of visual eloquence" despite Banksy's verbal minimalism, his images convey two primary themes. The first challenges established values, authorities, and institutions in the name of unspecified freedoms. The second justifies the former, rooted in a broadly libertarian perspective emphasizing harmony through equal power distribution. This viewpoint finds roots in Christian doctrine, recognizing the equal dignity of everyone, and Enlightenment ideals, proposing progress and education as solutions to societal issues. The article thinks this approach resonates in a world where widespread education and global communication allow like-minded groups to assert their views, fostering a sense of equality and shared dignity among those holding similar perspectives. Banksy's global recognition owes much to the advent of social media. Without these platforms, he might have remained a local legend known primarily to those who happened upon his works in the streets. However, the widespread sharing of his art on social media has transformed Banksy into a cultural phenomenon with an international audience. The viral nature of social media allows his thought-provoking pieces to reach diverse corners of the world, sparking conversations and making Banksy a household name beyond the confines of his local context. In essence, social media has elevated Banksy from a local legend to a globally celebrated and influential artist (Monumental Propaganda, 2014). It also plays a role that his artworks pop up all over the world, and since it is street art, they are not easily collected; transporting them from the street to a museum significantly impacts the genuine interpretation of the works. The fact that they are globally dispersed also complicates the journey for someone who might want to see them in person. Additionally, some of his work is in war zones, such as Gaza or Ukraine, which does not simplify the travel for those interested in the original artwork. Banksy exhibits a sophisticated approach to media utilization, employing various techniques to ensure the longevity and accessibility of his artworks. Beyond the traditional canvas, Banksy ingeniously leverages modern technology, such as cameras, to capture footage of his art in public spaces. This strategic move not only serves as documentation but also enables the survival of his creations even if physically removed or destroyed. Understanding the power of the press,

Banksy has actively engaged with newspapers, providing them with images of his works and accompanying articles. This proactive involvement ensures that his art reaches a broader audience and remains in the public consciousness. Additionally, he has taken the initiative to photograph his pieces, creating a visual archive that transcends the ephemeral nature of street art. Banksy's commitment to accessibility is further demonstrated through his book, a compilation of his works and insightful thoughts. Moreover, his involvement in film production, leading to an Oscar nomination, highlights his multifaceted artistic pursuits. Central to Banksy's communication strategy is his website, a dynamic platform where he regularly shares his latest creations. Notably, the inclusion of a comment section emphasizes his belief in open dialogue, allowing the public to engage and participate in discussions. By occasionally unveiling his works on this platform, Banksy underscores the democratic nature of communication, reinforcing that art is meant for everyone to experience and appreciate (Santos, 2020)

#### 4.7. Propagandistic elements

Banksy's art shares some commonalities with propaganda, primarily in its ability to convey messages, provoke thought, and influence public opinion. Here we can name some common aspects between Banksy's art and propaganda. For example, political and social commentary. Both Banksy's art and propaganda often carry strong political and social messages. They address contemporary issues, challenge societal norms, and critique political establishments. Moreover, we can see in Banksy's art mass communication as a tool. Propaganda is known for its use of mass media to disseminate messages, and Banksy similarly utilizes public spaces, social media, and traditional media to reach a wide audience. The street art format allows Banksy's work to be visible to the public at large. As previously we could see, Banksy uses symbolism, and it is important to note that this too has often become a tool of propaganda. Banksy, like propaganda, frequently employs symbolism and iconic imagery to convey messages in a straightforward and impactful manner. His use of recognizable symbols enhances the accessibility and immediate comprehension of his art. Another common attribute we can observe is the call-to-action strategy. Both Banksy's art and propaganda aim to elicit a response or reaction from the audience. Whether it is prompting thought, inspiring change, or challenging the status quo, they share a goal of influencing perceptions and behavior. Banksy often employs subversive and satirical elements in his art, challenging authority and questioning societal norms. Propaganda, too, can use satire to criticize or mock opponents and authority figures. Furthermore, the two final similar tools are the accessibility and use of media. Banksy's art, much like propaganda, is designed to be accessible to the public. Street art brings art out of traditional galleries and museums, making it available to people in their everyday environments. Both leverage various media and technology to enhance their impact. Banksy engages with social media, films, and other modern platforms, while propaganda traditionally exploits the power of mass media.

While Banksy's work shares these commonalities with propaganda, it is essential to note that the intent and context of his art may differ significantly from the often manipulative and agenda-driven nature of traditional propaganda. Banksy's art often encourages viewers to question and think critically about the messages presented. However, we cannot overlook the fact that, alongside the similarities between graffiti and, for instance, World War propaganda posters, there are also contemporary political posters that, in certain cases, evoke propagandistic effects. In many countries today, they not only evoke, but also embody all the characteristics listed above. Therefore, it is important to analyze and examine Banksy's body of work, regardless of whether we agree with his creations or hold different ideological views, as his art has a significant impact on our era and reaches millions of people.

## 4.8. Criticism

It is not a wonder that Banksy's art often faces criticism, as it pushes sensitive boundaries and sometimes expresses opinions in a confrontational manner, leaving no room for subtlety. This might give the impression of a lofty stance. According to Lewisohn (2008) opinions about Banksy tend to fall into two extremes: people either love him or hate him. Even Lewisohn himself struggles to form a definitive opinion about Banksy. While he offers sharp criticism of Banksy, he also holds him in high regard. Those who dislike Banksy's art or ideology often perceive him as simplistic and patronizing. Banksy originally started as a graffiti artist, but his style has evolved more towards street art. Traditional graffiti writers sometimes see Banksy as representing the stereotype of an "art fag," which refers to someone perceived as overly focused on art and disconnected from the original graffiti culture. However, they still respect his savvy business approach and the fact that wealthy collectors now seek out his work. Lewisohn explained that Banksy has made a huge impact and brought a lot of attention to social issues through his art. However, whether his work will last and how good it really is are still up for debate. Since he is the most famous artist doing this kind of art, he is an easy target for criticism. In the same time, the same criticisms could be made about many other street artists too.

As "Banksy, the art of visual eloquence" puts it, Banksy's artistic expressions challenging rules and authority are scrutinized for potentially misinterpreting the Milgram experiment, suggesting that rules should be violated for a perceived greater good, a sentiment resonating with a substantial portion of society. The artist's focus on targeting large commercial companies as the real power behind the state is acknowledged, with recognition of the validity of opposing corporate exploitation. Ethical concerns are raised regarding Banksy's use of powerful and shocking images, exemplified by "Napalm (Can't Beat That Feeling)." The "Banksy, the art of visual eloquence" deliberates on the ethical implications of instrumentalizing a victim's agony for political messages, exploring the impact and possible ethical dilemmas associated with such tactics.

Banksy's work, emphasizing concepts like hope and reconciliation. Paintings on the Palestine wall and iconic images like the girl with a balloon are highlighted, showcasing the contradictions and ambivalence that contribute to the potency of these works. The analysis of Banksy's self-shredding artwork at Sotheby's reveals a commentary on the destructive nature of pursuing desires and serves as an allegory of capitalism, where the shredded art paradoxically gains value. The "Banksy, the art of visual eloquence" also points out contradictions in Banksy's success, questioning whether his transformation into an icon of "chic protest" aligns with the system he initially critiqued. Criticism extends to Banksy's deviation from the initial principles of street art, particularly the resistance to appropriation. The tension between the illegal, rebellious origins of street art and the eventual acceptance and commodification of Banksy's work within mainstream culture is highlighted. In conclusion, the critiques encompass ethical considerations, the potential oversimplification of complex issues, contradictions in Banksy's success, and the evolving role of street art within mainstream culture, portraying it as a cultural ornament for politicians with a suggestion of hypocrisy in the societal approach to subversive art.

There is interconnectedness between propaganda, advertising, and graffiti, emphasizing their common features, similarities, and differences. Advertising has evolved from fact-based approaches to the aestheticization of commodities, selling a way of life rather than just products. This shift has turned consumers into neurotic, obsessive-compulsive individuals with a short attention span. Alex Kataeas (2006) shows the parallels between advertising and propaganda, noting that both make themselves ubiquitous to shape public opinion. It is an argument that advertising plays a central role in society, promoting agendas and maintaining the status quo for the dominant elite. Propaganda, in this context, becomes a tool for survival in a capitalist economy by perpetuating a structure dependent on perpetual consumption. He delves into the

role of advertising in the formation of graffiti, highlighting two major influences: fame and visual manifestation. Graffiti artists, much like advertisers, seek recognition and respect, competing for subcultural and financial capital. The visual aspect of graffiti, influenced by signage and advertising aesthetics, mirrors the strategies employed by advertisers. Kataeas sees graffiti as a form of guerrilla tactics for individual expression, while advertising serves the elite's agenda. Despite operating in different leagues—one driven by commercial profit and the other by individual expression—advertising and graffiti share common ground in seeking attention and penetration. But it is questionable whether graffiti is truly independent and original, or if it simply copies ideas from advertising. It suggests looking at history to understand how graffiti has changed over time and to learn more about how it works.

## 5. A Digital Cartoon Icon

Pepe the Frog, initially was just a floppy character created by artist Matt Furie, quickly morphed into a symbol that polarized opinions. While some saw him as a harmless joke, others adopted him as a rallying emblem for various causes. Pepe's evolution from an innocent meme to a politically charged icon reflects the complex nature of internet culture, thus all of these are tied to various communities on the internet. When Pepe came into the spotlight, it gained popularity on internet forums like 4chan. As his fame grew, Pepe became a versatile meme, adapting to various contexts and born countless versions. Eventually, Pepe found himself at the center of political battles, which were used to provoke reactions and shape narratives. However, Pepe's journey took a darker turn when he was appropriated by extremists. The cartoonish character evolved to be associated with hate, it even became a hate symbol. This led to widespread condemnation and further fueled Pepe's association with white nationalism. Despite the people's efforts to reclaim Pepe's original meaning, the internet had already changed his image with its flow of content. The phenomenon of Pepe reflects the broader concept of memes. They act as vehicles for sharing culture and can be taken over for different reasons. The study of internet memes, or "memetics," has attracted attention from diverse groups, including military strategists and online agitators. These actors recognize the power of memes to shape public discourse and influence perceptions, both online and offline. In the digital age, memes have become battlegrounds in the larger conflict of LikeWar, where online fights have real-world consequences (Singer & Brookin, 2018). Perhaps, the first significant element in studying Pepe the Frog is its visual appearance. Pepe the Frog is characterized by his cartoonish appearance, featuring a simple, stylized design with exaggerated facial features. Pepe is the embodiment of the so-called "Ugly Aesthetic".



Figure 5.1 Feels Good Man



What does it mean, ugly aesthetic? As described by Douglas (2014) embraces imperfections and amateurish qualities in digital content a celebration of the sloppy and the amateurish [which] have included freehand mouse drawing, digital puppetry, scanned drawings, poor grammar and spelling, human-made glitches, and rough photo manipulation” (p. 314-315). This kind of aesthetic reflects the changing technology of the internet age, where things that are unconventional and unpolished are accepted rather than rejected. This has led to the emergence of a distinct and sometimes quirky visual style online.

This meme perfectly embodies this style, as his large, bulging eyes and wide mouth contribute to his expressive range, allowing for various emotional expressions, including happiness, sadness, and sarcasm. In Pepe the frog-like features are recognizable, but its expressions make it more human-like. One of Pepe's defining features is his adaptability and versatility in different contexts and situations. His simplistic design allows for easy modification and adaptation, making him a highly malleable and customizable character that can be repurposed to convey a wide range of messages and emotions.

Pepe is often depicted in iconic poses or performing recognizable gestures that have become synonymous with his character. These poses and gestures, such as "Feels Good Man", "Sad Pepe" or the "Smug Pepe," serve as visual shorthand for conveying specific attitudes or responses within the meme culture. It is essential to keep in mind that the character was initially a fictional figure from a comic and only later began to receive greater attention.

What is truly fascinating about this character's story is how, once it was no longer under the control of its creator, it continued to exist and evolve independently. Shifman (2007) suggests that humor on the internet combines elements of old and new. Websites known for jokes not only keep humor alive but also invent new kinds. The internet's ability to interact, use different media, and connect people worldwide is key to shaping these fresh types of humor. Interactivity allows users to engage in joke-telling processes, although this form of "interactive humor" often maintains the original content and structure of the joke. Multimedia is evident in the variety of humorous texts, with visual content dominating over verbal ones, reflecting a global trend in the humor center. Shifman thinks that cyber-humor often focuses on global topics like sex, gender, and animals, rather than local issues such as ethnicity and politics. Visual and physical humor, like "home video" or "media slapstick," is especially popular. However, even though this humor is global, it mainly reflects Western, capitalist, and youth-oriented values.

## 5.1. Visual Symbol

Beyond Pepe's literal representation, Pepe is often used as a visual metaphor or symbol to convey deeper meanings or concepts. Depending on the context of the meme, Pepe may symbolize various themes such as internet culture, social commentary, political satire, or existential crisis. Pepe's visual appearance may incorporate references to popular culture, internet phenomena, or historical figures, reflecting the ever-evolving nature of memes and their ability to remix and reinterpret existing imagery. Over time, Pepe's visual representation has evolved alongside shifts in internet culture, adapting to new trends, themes, and cultural references while retaining his core identity as a liked internet icon.

Edwards and Winkler (1997) talk about editorial cartoons and Peters and Allan (2021) parallel this concept with Pepe. First, what is an editorial cartoon? According to Britannica, an editorial cartoon is an illustrated commentary on politics, politicians, and current events, often featuring exaggerated caricatures. It is an opinion-driven form of expression commonly found in the



editorial sections of newspapers and online platforms. These cartoons require a basic understanding of the subject matter and employ metaphorical and satirical language to highlight political issues and discrepancies. While reflecting the artist's viewpoint and amplifying certain aspects, ethical standards prohibit altering facts. Successful editorial cartoons serve a vital role in society by fostering critical thinking and providing entertaining insights into the news

Peters and Allan (2021) write about weaponizing memes and show Pepe the Frog as an example. According to their theory, editorial cartoons, traditionally seen as a form of journalism, are undergoing a transformation in their role and significance within the media landscape. This could imply that their impact, credibility, or relevance is being reevaluated or altered. Memes, which were originally associated with internet culture, humor, or satire, are now playing a more prominent role in shaping public opinion and discourse. Memes were initially confined to certain online communities or subcultures.

Although Pepe's author's real intention was to create a lovable character for a comicbook, his afterlife of the character made him an editorial cartoon. This is not surprising because memes are increasingly influencing how news and current affairs are reported and discussed. They are not only used for entertainment but are also becoming tools for commentary, critique, and expression within the realm of public affairs. According to Brown (2022) while memes are often seen as light entertainment, researchers argue they serve a serious purpose. Memes function as a language, capable of transcending cultures and forming collective identities. They are powerful tools for self-expression, social connection, and even political activism. They offer a form of social support and identity formation, particularly among marginalized groups. Political memes can challenge power structures and it can encourage political participation. However, memes also have a dark side, as they can spread misinformation and conspiracy theories. During crises like the pandemic, they fill gaps in knowledge, sometimes strengthening harmful beliefs. Bauckhage (2011) thinks that the term "Internet meme" refers to rapidly spreading content that gains popularity or notoriety online. Recently, there has been increased public interest in memes, leading to dedicated websites and communities focused on this topic. Professionals in marketing and campaigning have also embraced memes to connect with trendy audiences.

According to Milligan (2019) to grasp why a meme holds significance and how it evolves, it is crucial to delve into two significant aspects: the tools or platforms used by its creators and the cultural conventions prevalent among its users. Essentially, to dissect a meme's journey in terms of its rhetorical impact—how it is employed, where it spreads, etc.—Milligan claims, we must first grasp the context in which it originated. For instance, when analyzing Pepe the Frog, it is imperative to examine the environment of platforms like 4chan and the specific cultural norms that shape the behaviors and interactions of its users. These factors provide invaluable insights into understanding the meme's inception, dissemination, and evolving meanings within its online community.

Edwards and Winkler's theory is (1997) when something is ambiguous, it leads to debate, which then results in continued attention and involvement. This means that appropriation and recontextualization play significant roles in transforming visual images into representative forms. This theory does not only apply to political cartoons but also to memes, which have the capacity to be interpreted differently and adapted by various groups. Initially, memes draw immediate attention, but over time, they sustain engagement as people continue to discuss and reinterpret them. This evolution from initial recognition to ongoing participation turns the meme into a memegraph: a widely shared cultural symbol that varies and is chosen by an audience, who associate it with specific ideologies or groups of related memes.

## 5.2. Eras of Pepe the Frog

We can distinguish seven different eras in Pepe the Frog's existence. These are the following:

1. Creation in Boy's Club (2005): Pepe the Frog first appeared as a character in the online comic "Boy's Club" by Matt Furie. This marks the character's origin and initial context.
2. Transformation into Meme (2008-2010): Pepe started to gain traction as a meme on various internet forums and imageboards, evolving beyond his original comic context. This period saw the emergence of various Pepe variations and catchphrases.
3. Widespread Internet Meme (2010s): Pepe became a widely recognized internet meme, often referred to as the "sad frog meme" by those unfamiliar with the character's name. His image was used in various contexts, from expressing emotions to humorous situations.
4. Rise of "Rare Pepes" (2015): The concept of "rare Pepes" emerged, referring to unique or obscure variations of the Pepe meme. This led to a subculture of collecting and trading rare Pepe images.
5. Appropriation by Hate Groups (2016): Pepe's image was appropriated by various hate groups, particularly on platforms like 4chan and 8chan, who used the character in racist, antisemitic, or otherwise bigoted contexts. This marked a significant turn in Pepe's image.
6. Association with Alt-Right Movement (2016): During the 2016 presidential election in the United States, Pepe became associated with the alt-right movement, particularly due to its use by supporters of Donald Trump. This resulted in leaving a negative judgment in certain groups.
7. Efforts to Reclaim Pepe (2016): In response to Pepe's association with hate groups, efforts were made to reclaim the character. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) collaborated with Matt Furie, Pepe's creator, to launch the #SavePepe campaign to restore Pepe's original, non-bigoted meaning.

### 5.2.1. Pepe the Frog: Early Origins and Adoption

"Feels Good Man" originates from a six-panel story in Boy's Club where Pepe is depicted peeing with his pants down. When confronted about this behavior, Pepe nonchalantly responds with "feels good man." This scene encapsulates the essence of Boy's Club, emphasizing fun and self-gratification. Pepe's actions defy social norms and reflect a carefree attitude towards societal expectations. Despite being the subject of amusement for the other characters, Pepe remains unfazed, even embracing their attempts to humiliate him. His demeanor reflects a beta male role, contrasting with more traditionally masculine characters. This attitude resonates with users of 4chan, who similarly embrace non-conformity and "trolling" (Douglas, N., 2014). According to Merriam-Webster, "troll" refers to the individuals who engage in such disruptive online behavior. These internet trolls intentionally disrupt online communities, often for their own amusement or to provoke a reaction from others. The term's evolution reflects the changing dynamics of online communication and the emergence of digital cultures where trolling has become a prevalent phenomenon.

If we want to analyze Pepe the Frog and understand its significance, it is essential to familiarize ourselves with internet culture, particularly within the realm of 4chan.

In short, to fully grasp the significance of Pepe the Frog, we must delve into internet culture, with a focus on platforms like 4chan, as highlighted in Dewey's (2014) article, 4chan is an

online forum where users can discuss various topics anonymously. Unlike other forums where users create accounts and pick usernames, on 4chan, you can participate without any identification. This anonymity allows people to freely express themselves without fear of accountability. However, it also means you cannot establish social connections with other users unless they reveal their identity. The site is divided into different sections called "boards," covering topics from cooking to technology. Dewey writes that most users are "young, college-educated men interested in Japanese culture, video games, comics and technology". While some discussions are harmless, others can be disturbing, with boards dedicated to topics like hardcore porn and politically incorrect discussions.

Two notorious boards are important for us to highlight on 4chan are /pol/, which discusses news and politics but often devolves into racist or misogynistic conversations, and /b/, where users can share disturbing content that is not allowed elsewhere on the site. Despite its reputation, some users see 4chan as a place to freely discuss taboo topics without social restrictions. However, 4chan is also known for its darker side, with users engaging in hoaxes, cyberbullying, and spreading offensive content. The site's anonymity makes it difficult to determine the motives of its users, but it's clear that a mix of pranksters, curious individuals, and unsavory characters make up its community.

"Feels Good Man" Pepe quickly spread through 4chan and other platforms, becoming a popular image macro used to express contentment or self-gratification. While the meme evolved over time with various reinterpretations, the phrase "feels good man" remained a consistent theme, symbolizing a disregard for societal expectations and a celebration of personal satisfaction.

"Sad Frog/Feels Bad Man" emerged as a notable variation of "Feels Good Man," depicting Pepe with a frown instead of a smile and expressing a sense of sadness or disappointment. This version first appeared on Reddit in January 2009, altering the original drawing to convey a different emotional tone. While "Feels Good Man" celebrates pleasure, "Sad Frog" laments its absence, yet both retain a whimsical, exaggerated quality. Even in sadness, Pepe's expression seems exaggerated to the point of being comical, suggesting a playful interpretation of the emotion (Douglas, 2014). In the documentary movie, called Feel Good Man (2020) it becomes evident how deeply people could relate to the sad Pepe. Previously, in online spaces, individuals typically presented their happiest and best selves, and forum users appreciated the opportunity to express themselves authentically, even when they were not feeling their best. In 2011, a new variation of Pepe emerged known as "Smug Frog." While still recognizable as Pepe, he sported a smirk, had his hand on his chin as if contemplating, and had a knowing look in his eyes. The earliest known version of "Smug Frog" was posted on 4chan in June 2011. Douglas (2014) thinks, while both "Smug Frog" and "Feels Good Man" relate to pleasure, the former exudes a sense of superiority and antagonism rather than neutral contentment. When used on platforms like 4chan, "Smug Frog" often targeted individuals being trolled or provoked controversy by being inserted into offensive or incongruous images. Douglas believes this smugness seemed directed not only at the subjects of the images but also at those who would be offended by them. Despite the departure from Pepe's original depiction, the essence of zaniness remained, as smugness often derived from amusement at others' expense.



*Figure 5.2 Smug Frog*



*Figure 5.3 Sad Frog*

### 5.2.2. Politics

Each Pepe meme variation, including "Smug Frog," had its own distinct portrayal and usage on social media. Initially, sharing Pepe memes didn't necessarily imply specific political or social views but rather reflected an individual's aesthetic preference. However, memes like "Smug Frog" laid the groundwork for Pepe's later association with the alt-right movement (Douglas, 2014). During the presidential campaign, something unexpected happened. Donald Trump and his son, Donald Trump Jr., posted a cartoon image on Twitter and Instagram. This image featured a frog character called Pepe, with Trump's hairstyle. Pepe had been a well-known internet meme for years, shared and modified across various online communities. The Trumps' posts were just the latest examples in the long history of the Pepe meme (Pettis, 2018).



Figure 5.4 Can't Stump the Trump



Figure 5.5 The Deplorables

Trump stands out as the first president to be constantly active on Twitter, which is quite different from previous presidents like Obama who also used social media but not to the same extent. Trump's tweets are frequent, sometimes controversial, and often filled with strong opinions. They often make it hard to tell if he is speaking officially or just expressing his personal thoughts. This tweeting style mirrors his public image and has become closely associated with his time in office (Milligan, 2019).

Donald Trump Jr. has shared Pepe memes on his social media accounts, including Twitter, particularly during his father's presidential campaign and presidency. These instances have sparked controversy and debate, as some critics argue that the use of Pepe in certain contexts can perpetuate or normalize extremist beliefs or ideologies. Using Pepe the Frog memes by figures like Donald Trump Jr. does not necessarily mean they support extremist views. However, Pepe's connection to certain online groups and political movements has sparked worries about its use in mainstream politics. So, while individuals may use Pepe innocently, its association with these groups can unintentionally normalize extremist symbols and ideas in political discussions.

On ABC's "Good Morning America," he defended himself against claims of making a Holocaust reference and addressed questions about an Instagram post featuring a Trump version of Pepe the Frog. Trump Jr. claimed he had no knowledge of Pepe's association with the white supremacist movement, viewing it simply as a frog in a wig and finding it amusing. He dismissed the criticism as "ridiculous," suggesting it was a distraction from discussing substantive policy

issues proposed by his father. Trump Jr. argued that critics resort to attacking him because they lack counterarguments against his father's policies (Nick, 2016). Hillary Clinton responded to these memes by explaining what the Pepe the Frog meme meant, but the forums simply dismissed it as an attempt by Hillary to explain meme culture to older generations, which younger people found funny.

By 2015, Pepe had become the most popular meme image across various platforms like Twitter and Tumblr. This widespread adoption of the Pepe meme by mainstream internet users, derogatorily referred to as normies by 4chan users, was seen as an intrusion into 4chan's anti-establishment culture. The term "normie" has become popular to describe someone who follows mainstream trends, has conventional habits and attitudes, and is generally not considered unique or remarkable. So, with these memes, it was easy to reach them (Lankshear & Knobel, 2019; Feels Good Man, 2020). Users of 4chan believed that Pepe the Frog, a character they saw as their own, was being taken over by people outside their community. To counter this, they started creating Pepe memes that were deliberately provocative, offensive, or unpleasant. This was their way of trying to take back Pepe and reinforce its association with 4chan's counterculture. Users of 4chan felt that Pepe the Frog, a symbol they considered uniquely theirs, was being taken over by outsiders. To reclaim Pepe, they created memes featuring Pepe in deliberately offensive or disturbing contexts, such as with Hitler mustaches or dressed in Ku Klux Klan robes. This was done to make Pepe unappealing to mainstream users. Additionally, during this time, Pepe the Frog became associated with the Trump presidential campaign and various alt-right and white nationalist groups (Lankshear & Knobel, 2019). Oren Segal, the Director of the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, claims in his article that Pepe is being depicted in offensive contexts, especially on forums known for fanaticism. The rise of the 'alt right' movement, coupled with the 2016 presidential election, further fueled Pepe's transformation into a symbol associated with racism and antisemitism.

The alt-right is a movement known for its extreme right-wing beliefs, often linked to racism and white supremacy. According to Milligan (2019), journalist David Neiwert (2018) delves into the origins and rise of the alt-right in his book *Alt-America*. Neiwert highlights the significant role the internet played in uniting individuals who share these views. Unlike other right-wing groups, the alt-right primarily emerged online, where people could communicate anonymously. This anonymity facilitated their connection and the dissemination of their ideas. Milligan notes that due to the lack of a formal structure within the alt-right, pinpointing an exact starting point for the movement is challenging. While not all Pepe images are offensive, many have been appropriated by hate groups. Due to its association with prejudice and hate, Pepe was added to the Hate on Display database. However, not all uses of Pepe are inherently racist, and some people are trying to reclaim it from hate groups. Nonetheless, Pepe's image is likely to remain exploited by racists and antisemites in the future.

The Pepe the Frog documentary emphasizes that memes had been utilized by certain communities as a form of self-expression online long before. It was impressive to them and sparked their interest to see a politician using the humorous images they had created. Indeed, if we start from the premise that Pepe the Frog did not actually signify anything substantial, just a funny image on the internet, then we might consider it somewhat youthful and appealing that serious individuals also use these memes. This was enough for some communities in the online space to favor Trump over other politicians. In this way a lot of people could be involved in politics who before were not included.

On the internet with good memes which can be viral, people tried to convince normies to vote for Trump. During a conference where Hillary Clinton was addressing the audience, someone from the crowd suddenly shouted "Pepe!" This interruption was significant because Pepe the Frog had become a symbol associated with Donald Trump's supporters during the 2016 presidential campaign. The shout was a clear reference to the internet meme culture that played a role in shaping the political discourse of that time. In the *Feels Good Man* movie, it showed that maybe people did not understand this kind of joke in the room, but for some groups who



have already known about Pepe the Frog for long, for them it was a significant scene. After the elections, the Russian Embassy shared a Smug Pepe image on their Twitter account, intending to make a commentary on a meeting between British Prime Minister Theresa May and the recently elected U.S. President Trump (BBC Trending, 2017).

### 5.2.2.1. The Alt-Right's Meme Magic

Over time, as Pepe the Frog gained increasing prominence in public discourse as both a character and a symbol, people began to detach him more and more from his role in the Pepe comic. Consequently, they began to craft their own narratives and backstory for him. So, creativity and imagination soon reached new levels.

In short, Kek is a fictional deity embraced by the Alt-right movement, symbolizing chaos and darkness. The connection to Pepe the Frog originates from online gaming chat rooms, where "LOL" was translated to "KEK" due to language barriers. It was an inside joke on platform 4chan. The alt-right appropriated this term, associating it with an Egyptian god known for chaos. The Cult of Kek was born on platforms like 4chan, where it evolved into a satirical religion used to troll liberals and promote alt-right ideology. Adherents created a mythology around Kek, including a fictional kingdom called Kekistan and a flag resembling a Nazi banner. The use of Kek serves as a tribal marker for the alt-right, signaling allegiance to its principles. Despite its satirical nature, Kek has been employed by the alt-right to spread racist and misogynistic propaganda under the guise of humor (Neiwert, D. 2017). According to Know Your Meme, the term "Kekistan" was first coined on Reddit in 2015. However, its popularity surged on Twitter in 2017 when Carl Benjamin, a prominent alt-right personality on YouTube, tweeted suggesting that "shitposters" (which refer to individuals who frequently post provocative or inflammatory content online for the sake of humor or disruption) could potentially be considered as an ethnic group according to the criteria set by the British government. Benjamin's followers then embraced the idea, proposing that this supposed ethnicity be termed "Kekistani." Many of Benjamin's supporters responded to his tweet using the hashtag #FreeKekistan, sparking the creation of an online pseudo-social movement. After Carl Benjamin's initial tweet, the hashtag #FreeKekistan gained momentum beyond his followers. It became popular among the alt-right community. Many tweets featuring this hashtag showcased Pepe the Frog, often portraying him as a soldier or politician supporting the cause of Kekistan. This hashtag served as a way for the alt-right to parody and make fun of real social and political movements, for example movements like Free Tibet but with a satirical twist.



Figure 5.6 Cult of Kek

### 5.2.2.2. Hong Kong Protests

The protests in Hong Kong began over an extradition bill in June 2019 but evolved into a broader movement against Beijing's influence and erosion of civil liberties. Despite the government's concessions, like withdrawing the bill, protests continued over concerns about police conduct and democracy. Protesters employed various tactics, including strikes and mass demonstrations, leading to clashes with police. The Chinese government supported Hong Kong's leader but has not offered a clear solution to the crisis (Victor & Yuhas, 2019).

It was an unexpected use of Pepe the Frog as a symbol of pro-democracy in the Hong Kong protests, despite its association with racism and the alt-right movement elsewhere. While the Anti-Defamation League and others see Pepe as a hate symbol, protesters in Hong Kong embrace him as a symbol of their resistance against authoritarianism. Many protesters were unaware of Pepe's alt-right connotations outside of Hong Kong and simply liked his character. Despite efforts to rehabilitate Pepe's image by its creator, Matt Furie, the Hong Kong protesters see him as one of their own, representing their struggle for democracy (Victor, 2019). The curiosity of the case, though not surprising given previous events, is that Pepe the Frog also gained popularity here from an online platform. Even though they were unaware of the meme's backstory and its previous uses as symbols, they were unaware of its prior associations and how it had been used as symbols before. The LIHKG forum played a pivotal role during the Anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong. LIHKG functioned as a digital hub where protesters could anonymously exchange information, discuss tactics, and foster solidarity (Lee, 2020). We can discover quite a few similarities in the structure and use of LIHKG and 4chan. Unlike other social media platforms, LIHKG did not offer personal profile pages or sustained opinion leadership, allowing for a more bottom-up and spontaneous type of communication (Lee, 2021; Jacobs et al., 2022). Within LIHKG, users shared various promotional materials, including digital images and stickers for social media and urban protests. One notable figure that emerged from this digital landscape was Pepe the Frog, who became a symbol of the movement. Despite some initial debate about Pepe's outsider status, the frog figure gained traction and was widely adopted in various forms, from digital cartoons to street art. Overall, LIHKG played a crucial role in facilitating communication and coordination among protesters during the Anti-ELAB movement, while also serving as a space for discussions on gender dynamics and feminist activism within the movement (Jacobs et al., 2022).

So, from The New York Times report, it becomes clear that the participants in the movement do not actually regret using a character with different meanings in other countries. They explained this by pointing out that every culture has its own symbols. It was the youth who took to the streets to protest, so they chose a character that was familiar to them in the online space (Victor, 2019).

## 5.3. Deepfake

In Amy Yee's article, "The country inoculating against disinformation" (2022) on BBC, she reports that in Estonia, media literacy education has emerged as a pivotal component of both its digital culture and national security strategy due to the significant threats posed by disinformation campaigns. Following violent protests sparked by false news during the 2007 cyber-attack, Estonia not only advanced its cybersecurity measures but also prioritized integrating media literacy into its public-school curriculum. Since 2010, Estonian students have been required to take a "media and influence" course in 10th grade, viewing this education as essential alongside traditional subjects like math and reading. Estonia takes teaching people to tell truth from lies seriously, and this has helped them score well in media freedom and education rankings. Estonia wants its citizens to think critically about media from a young age, so they integrate media literacy into different subjects in school. This helps people analyze information



better and protect themselves from online dangers. They are also working on making sure everyone, regardless of age or background, can access this education, but it is not always easy to reach everyone or keep the quality consistent.

In addition to the efforts described, there is also an initiative aimed at providing support for teachers working with students aged 15-18. This initiative has resulted in the creation of a Toolkit consisting of 11 units. The Toolkit includes an introductory unit covering automatic thinking and cognitive biases, as well as 10 units dedicated to specific biases. These activities are based on real-life examples from various domains including advertising, social media, politics, and social issues, as well as content developed by extremists. Moreover, in this book, Pepe the Frog is also included as part of the curriculum (Bouko et al., 2020).

Similarly, in an article by Munson (2021) she explores the adverse effects of internet memes, revealing their potential to disseminate disinformation and manipulate societal behaviors. Despite memes' typically innocuous or humorous nature, they wield significant influence when employed to propagate false information or shape political outcomes. Drawing parallels to biological viruses, Utah State University professor Nick Flann highlights memes' ability to spread and manipulate human behavior intentionally, raising concerns about their potential use in election interference and societal disruption.

Munson traces memes' origins to evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' concept of "memes" as cultural replicators, which have gained potency with the advent of the internet and advanced AI technology. To counter the spread of harmful memes, strategies include social media regulation, bolstering internet literacy, and developing AI tools to detect deepfakes. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, deepfake is a type of media, like a video, that has been changed using computer technology to make it look like someone else is in it. This is often done to make it seem like a person is doing something they did not do.

Ultimately, both the Estonian approach to media literacy education and the insights from the article underscore the imperative of vigilance in navigating the digital landscape and discerning the impact of the information consumed and shared on society.

## 5.4. Why Is Pepe an Important Case?

Pepe the Frog memes encapsulate a wide array of underlying themes and messages, serving as a medium for expressing political views, social commentary, satire, and cultural critique. These memes often engage with contemporary issues and societal norms in various ways. These memes frequently delve into political satire, using the character to mock politicians, political ideologies, and government policies. For example, Pepe may be depicted as different political figures, such as Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin, to satirize their actions or beliefs. These memes provide a platform for expressing dissatisfaction with the political status quo or advocating for specific political agendas. Pepe memes often serve as a reflection of societal norms and behaviors, highlighting absurdities or contradictions within contemporary culture.

They may address topics such as consumerism, social media obsession, or celebrity culture, offering humorous or critical perspectives on these aspects of modern society. Memes sometimes critique broader cultural trends or phenomena, including but not limited to issues related to race, gender, and identity. They may challenge stereotypes, explore cultural diversity, or shed light on overlooked social issues, fostering discussions about cultural values and norms. Given Pepe's origins as an internet meme, many Pepe memes engage directly with internet culture and trends. They may reference popular internet phenomena, incorporate internet slang or memes, or comment on the dynamics of online communities. They serve to both celebrate and critique aspects of internet culture, reflecting the digital age in which they thrive. Pepe the

Frog memes emerged within the cultural and social context of internet culture, primarily originating and proliferating on online communities and platforms such as 4chan, Reddit, and social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. These platforms serve as centers for digital interaction and expression, allowing users to share, remix, and discuss content freely. Pepe memes are deeply embedded within various subcultural communities, including gaming, anime, and meme culture itself. These communities often develop their own inside jokes, references, and symbols, which Pepe memes both participate in and influence. It is crucial to consider how we use memes. Thus, on the internet, individuals can express their opinions or viewpoints, whether anonymously or with their identity, using memes as a form of indirect communication. Pepe's evolution reflects the evolving tastes and sensibilities of these subcultures, contributing to his enduring relevance.

Pepe memes are rich with symbolism and subversive elements, reflecting the diverse perspectives and voices of internet culture. Pepe's malleable nature as a character allows for a wide range of interpretations and uses, from playful humor to pointed social critique. Through Pepe memes, internet users challenge dominant narratives, question authority, and explore taboo topics in ways that may not be possible through traditional forms of media. At the same time, Pepe's association with extremist groups and hate symbols has led to concerns about the potential negative impact of these memes. This tension between the playful and the problematic underscores the complex nature of internet culture and the ongoing debates about the responsibilities of content creators and platforms in shaping online discourse.

Pepe the Frog is an intriguing meme not only because of his character's background story but also because each instance of the meme carries its own unique meaning. This meaning can vary depending on factors such as when it appeared, its specific depiction, its intended use, and the individuals who use it. Engaging with memes is important because they have become integrated into the daily lives of certain generations. Communicating through memes is simple because each one carries some meaning. While the origin and backstory of many memes are known, others may not be as clear. However, interpretation depends on the recipient, as everyone may perceive a picture or animation differently.

Exploring internet memes can provide insights into the beliefs and ideas spread through social media and deepen our understanding of how culture intersects with technology. This guide aims to assist researchers in comprehending meme content and its connection to power dynamics.

Chris Baraniuk (2021) asks that question “What will today’s data tell future historians?”. Because today's digital records, including social media posts, photos, videos, and blogs, offer rich insights into daily life, behaviors, and societal norms. Thus, they provide detailed documentation of how people lived, communicated, and expressed themselves, painting a vivid picture of our time. They may grapple with understanding the authenticity and context of the information, especially considering the prevalence of misinformation and the rapid evolution of digital platforms. He argues that algorithms, which shape much of our online experiences today, may further complicate efforts to interpret historical events and societal trends. Moreover, in the future, there might be so much digital information available that it could be challenging for researchers to go through it all. The digital footprint we leave behind has the potential to offer valuable insights into our society's values, beliefs, and responses to significant challenges like climate change. Ultimately, the study of our digital heritage will likely provide future generations with a multifaceted understanding of our era, revealing both its complexities and its tones.

## 6. Analytical comparison

Apparently, Banksy's graffiti and Pepe the Frog meme are two completely different subjects, but as we have seen in the previous chapters, Banksy's work and Pepe the Frog are not that far apart. They share many identical and completely opposite characteristics. It cannot be denied that in today's world both phenomena touch and affect many topics, and they are present in people's everyday lives, for whom more and for whom less. Maybe there are people who do not even pay attention to these phenomena so much and there are people whose lives are affected more. This may depend on who is interested in the topic, who is preoccupied by culture, socio-political situations or how present they are on internet platforms. But it directly or indirectly affects many people. On the surface, it might not have that much influence on our lives, but as Through the mentioned cases above, we can see that in some cases they have a really big impact on our world.

The analysis of the two phenomena paints a contemporary picture of both real life and Internet reality, as we can see whether the street walls or the images of the virtual world have a real effect on us. And these spaces all confront, or even create passages between them. Studying phenomena like Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog memes is crucial today for several reasons. Banksy's artwork and Pepe the Frog memes serve as reflections of contemporary culture, capturing the prevailing social, political, and cultural attitudes of our time. Understanding and analyzing these cultural artifacts helps us make sense of the world we live in and the issues that shape our society. Both Banksy's art and Pepe memes have had significant impacts on society, influencing public discourse, shaping perceptions, and sparking conversations about important issues. These phenomena often draw attention to problems that we read or see in the news every day, such as war situations or elections. Manytimes, attention is drawn to problems that are right in front of our eyes, yet we do not dealwith them enough, since they are part of the usual everyday life. By studying their effects on individuals and communities, we can better understand how art and memes contribute to social change and cultural evolution. In an increasingly digital world, internet memes like Pepe have become powerful tools for communication, expression, and social interaction. Exploring the cultural significance of Pepe and similar memes helps us grasp the dynamics ofonline culture and the ways in which digital technologies shape our lives. Banksy's anonymity and guerrilla art tactics challenge traditional notions of artistic authorship, ownership, and control. By examining Banksy's work and the controversies surrounding it,we confront questions about artistic freedom, censorship, and the role of art in public spaces. Both Banksy's art and Pepe memes have been embraced by various social and political movements, from anti-establishment activism to far-right extremism. Analyzing their use within different movements provides insights into the strategies, ideologies, and tactics employed by activists and cultural influencers. Pepe the Frog's evolution from an innocuous cartoon character to a symbol of hate highlights the complexities of identity and representation in digital culture. Exploring Pepe's journey helps us understand how symbols can be appropriated, transformed, and contested in the digital age.

Studying Banksy's art and Pepe memes promotes media literacy by encouraging critical thinking, analysis, and interpretation of visual culture. By interacting with these cultural items, people learn how to understand and judge the many images and messages they see in today's media.

### 6.1. Artistic Expression

In the realm of contemporary artistic expression, Banksy's thought-provoking street art and Pepe the Frog's ubiquitous internet meme status stand as contrasting yet influential phenomena. While Banksy's works confront viewers with satirical and politically charged messages through street art, Pepe the Frog's image is remixed across various online platformsas a meme. So, this is a big difference, that one comes to us on the streets, while the other on Internet sites.

Banksy utilizes public walls and buildings as his canvas, employing stencils and spray paint to create artworks that challenge societal norms and power structures. His street art serves as visual critiques of political corruption, social injustice, and corporate greed, inviting viewers to reflect on pressing issues and sparking dialogue. He also interprets his own art as if advertising posters can shape the skyline, then so can his works. In contrast, Pepe the Frog emerged from an online comic series but gained prominence as an internet meme, with users remixing his image to express a wide range of emotions and ideas. We often do not even know who the real creator of remixes was, which is like the fact that we do not know who Banksy is either. Both cases can be interpreted as does it really matter who created them? Is not creation itself more important? The difference is that Banksy is a phenomenon together with his creations, but Pepe the Frog is a phenomenon, while its creator is not really. This is also shown by the fact that, although the creator repeatedly emphasized the purpose of the character and even drew Pepe's funeral, he did not actually achieve anything, as people wanted to continue to use him as a tool to express their own opinions and views.

Despite their differing mediums and origins, both Banksy and Pepe symbolize the democratizing potential of art and its ability to spark dialogue and dissent. Banksy's works provoke contemplation and reflection in public spaces, while Pepe's meme reflects the participatory and fluid nature of online culture. However, Pepe's image has also been appropriated by extremist groups, leading to its association with hate symbols and ideological controversies. Pepe the Frog expresses simple emotions. Smiling, crying or just angry. They can be memes in any case, it depends on the user what he uses them for, since, for example, it is a symbol of hate, but it was never intended to be. While Banksy's graffiti is more to the point, it is about specifics, it means it is harder to use as we just want to use his artworks. As we have previously analyzed some of his works, Banksy's opinion is strongly reflected in his works. Its symbols are easy to decipher and interpret. In essence, Banksy and Pepe represent distinct yet interconnected facets of contemporary artistic expression, challenging traditional notions of art and influencing public discourse in their respective realms. Their significance lies not only in their artistic merit but also in their ability to provoke conversations about societal issues and the evolving dynamics of digital media and internet culture. It is perhaps up to the viewers to decide whether it is art, since according to some, they fit under the umbrella of art in the traditional sense, and according to others, they do not fit.

## 6.2. Cultural Impact

Banksy's influence on modern culture, politics, and society is clear in how he goes beyond traditional art galleries to connect with people on social and political topics. His provocative street art challenges societal norms and sparks discussions about topics such as capitalism, consumerism, and government surveillance. Banksy's works often become focal points for activism and social movements and inspiring collective action.

In contrast, Pepe the Frog's cultural impact is largely rooted in internet culture and meme communities. Initially created as a character in an online comic series, Pepe evolved into a widely recognized meme used across various online platforms. His image has been remixed and repurposed to express a wide range of emotions and ideas, contributing to the development of internet culture and online communication styles.

However, Pepe's cultural impact became more complex as his image was appropriated by extremist groups, leading to associations with hate symbols and ideological controversies. Despite efforts to reclaim Pepe's image by internet users, his association with hate speech has persisted, highlighting the challenges of navigating online spaces and addressing the spread of harmful ideologies. Perhaps it can be said that Banksy mostly expresses what he thinks, the way he sees the world. While Pepe mostly expresses the opinion of users, which may differ from individual to individual. This is also why Pepe has become a symbol of hatred, while

on another continent the meme was used as a symbol of freedom.

Overall, both Banksy and Pepe have left significant imprints on contemporary culture, politics, and society, albeit through different mediums and contexts. Banksy's street art confronts viewers with powerful messages in public spaces, while Pepe's meme status reflects the participatory and fluid nature of internet culture. Their influence underscores the dynamic relationship between art, technology, and social change in the modern era.

### 6.3. Reception and Controversy

Both Banksy and Pepe the Frog have elicited diverse receptions and sparked controversies within various audiences and communities.

Banksy's street art has garnered widespread acclaim from art enthusiasts and the public alike for its thought-provoking messages and unconventional approach to artistic expression. However, his work has also faced criticism from authorities and property owners who view it as vandalism rather than art. The ambiguous legality of his guerrilla-style art installations often leads to debates about public space, ownership, and the role of art in society.

Similarly, Pepe the Frog's reception has been multifaceted. Initially embraced as a harmless and playful meme within internet communities, Pepe's image took a turn when it was appropriated by extremist groups and associated with hate speech and racist ideologies. This shift in perception led to widespread disapproval of Pepe's use as a hate symbol and efforts by internet users to reclaim his image. Despite these efforts, Pepe's association with extremism has remained a source of controversy and conflict, highlighting the complexities of online culture and the challenges of combating harmful content.

In both cases, the reception and controversies surrounding Banksy and Pepe reflect broader societal debates about art, expression, and the boundaries of acceptable discourse. Their work provokes discussions about censorship, freedom of speech, and the responsibility of creators and audiences in shaping cultural narratives.

### 6.4. Ownership and Control

Ownership and control are central themes in the discourse surrounding both Banksy's artwork and Pepe the Frog meme.

For Banksy, the question of ownership often arises due to the nature of his street art, which is typically created without permission on public or private property. This raises complex legal and ethical questions about who has the right to control and profit from his work. Property owners may seek to remove or preserve Banksy's murals, leading to debates about artistic integrity, cultural value, and property rights. Additionally, the unauthorized reproduction and commercialization of Banksy's images further complicate issues of ownership and control, as they challenge traditional notions of authorship and copyright. Since he himself sometimes creates illegally, this question makes the whole matter even more complicated.

Similarly, the ownership and control of Pepe the Frog's image have been contested due to its widespread use on the internet. Originally created by artist Matt Furie for his comic series, Pepe became a meme shared and modified by countless internet users. This decentralized and collective ownership of Pepe's image led to difficulties in controlling its use, especially when it was co-opted by hate groups and extremists. Furie's attempts to reclaim ownership and control over Pepe through legal action and public statements underscored the challenges of preserving artistic integrity and preventing misappropriation in the digital age. In both cases, questions of ownership and control intersect with broader issues of authorship, intellectual property, and the democratization of culture in the digital era. The tension between artistic freedom and commercial exploitation underscores the complexities of navigating creative expression in an

increasingly interconnected and mediated world.

## 6.5. Transformation and Adaptation

Both Banksy's artwork and Pepe the Frog meme have undergone significant transformation and adaptation in response to changing cultural contexts and phenomena.

Banksy's street art, initially rooted in the underground graffiti scene, has evolved to become a globally recognized and celebrated form of artistic expression. As Banksy's popularity grew, his work transitioned from clandestine murals on urban walls to high-profile exhibitions in prestigious galleries and museums. This shift in context challenged traditional notions of artistry and accessibility, prompting discussions about the intersection of street art, institutional legitimacy, and commercialization. Additionally, Banksy's art has adapted to address contemporary issues such as political unrest, social inequality, and environmental degradation, reflecting and critiquing the zeitgeist of the times.

Similarly, Pepe the Frog's evolution from a relatively obscure comic character to a widespread internet meme demonstrates its capacity for adaptation in response to shifting cultural landscapes. Initially created by artist Matt Furie as a benign and humorous character in his comic series, Pepe gained traction as a meme within online communities, where users appropriated and modified its image to reflect a diverse array of cultural references and expressions. However, Pepe's transformation took a big turn when it was co-opted by extremist groups and hate symbols, prompting efforts to reclaim and rehabilitate its image. This process of adaptation reflects the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of internet culture, where symbols and meanings can rapidly evolve and mutate in response to changing contexts and social dynamics.

In both cases, the transformation and adaptation of Banksy's artwork and Pepe the Frog meme highlight the fluidity and malleability of cultural symbols in the digital age. Their ability to resonate with audiences across different contexts. While both Banksy's art and Pepememes aim to influence public opinion, their purposes may differ. Banksy's work often seeks to raise awareness of social and political issues and provoke critical reflection, whereas Pepe memes may be created for entertainment, trolling, or political advocacy.

## 6.6 Online vs. Offline Spaces

The distinction between online and offline spaces plays a significant role in the reception, dissemination, and impact of both Banksy's artwork and Pepe the Frog meme.

Banksy's street art primarily takes offline spaces, manifesting as murals and installations in urban environments. These physical manifestations often provoke immediate reactions from passersby and communities, contributing to public discourse and cultural dialogue. The ephemeral nature of street art also means that Banksy's pieces exist within the context of their surroundings, interacting with the architecture, socio-political climate, and local communities in dynamic ways. However, the accessibility of Banksy's art is limited to those who encounter it in person, creating a sense of exclusivity and mystique that enhances its allure.

In contrast, Pepe the Frog's presence is predominantly felt in online spaces, where it circulates as a digital image or meme across various platforms and social media networks. The internet's vast reach and instantaneous nature facilitate the rapid spread and remixing of Pepe memes, enabling them to permeate global culture with unprecedented speed and scale. Online communities serve as hubs for the creation, sharing, and evolution of Pepe memes, fostering a participatory culture where users actively contribute to its meaning and significance. However, the decentralization and anonymity of online spaces also make Pepe susceptible to hijacking and misuse by fringe groups, leading to controversies and conflicts over its interpretation and ownership. The juxtaposition of online and offline spaces highlights the divergent trajectories

and implications of Banksy's artwork and Pepe the Frog meme. While Banksy's art engages with physical environments and real-world contexts, Pepe's meme transcends geographical boundaries and exists within the digital realm of cyberspace. Despite these differences, both mediums demonstrate the power of visual imagery to provoke thought, evoke emotion, and shape cultural discourse across virtual and tangible landscapes. As I mentioned earlier, Banksy does not shy away from the online space either, since his works can be easily shaped or removed, so it is necessary to capture them. Banksy has an official website where he uploads his works and is also present on Instagram. So, we cannot say that his graffiti can only be seen on the streets or at exhibitions, but it is true that his presence on the Internet is not as strong as that of Pepe the Frog.

## 6.7. Conclusion of The Analysis

Banksy's street art and Pepe memes originate from grassroots movements or individuals rather than centralized government or institutional sources. They emerge organically from online communities or street artists, allowing for a decentralized and diverse range of voices to participate in shaping the message. Unlike traditional propaganda, which is typically disseminated top-down, Banksy's street art and Pepe memes invite participation and interaction from the audience. Viewers of Banksy's art may interpret and engage with the message in various ways, contributing to ongoing discussions and debates. Similarly, Pepe memes encourage users to remix and share the images, allowing for a collaborative and decentralized approach to spreading ideas.

Both Banksy's art and Pepe memes have had significant impacts on society, influencing public discourse, shaping perceptions, and sparking conversations about important issues. By studying their effects on individuals and communities, we can better understand how art and memes contribute to social change and cultural evolution. In an increasingly digital world, internet memes like Pepe have become powerful tools for communication, expression, and social interaction. Exploring the cultural significance of Pepe and similar memes helps us grasp the dynamics of online culture and the ways in which digital technologies shape our lives. Pepe memes spread rapidly across digital platforms, transcending geographic boundaries and reaching diverse audiences worldwide. Banksy's art, while often localized to specific urban environments, gains global visibility through social media and online platforms. This digital reach allows for the dissemination of messages on a scale and speed unimaginable with traditional propaganda methods. Banksy's anonymity and guerrilla art tactics challenge traditional notions of artistic authorship, ownership, and control. By examining Banksy's work and the controversies surrounding it, we confront questions about artistic freedom, censorship, and the role of art in public spaces. Both Banksy's art and Pepe memes have been embraced by various social and political movements, from anti-establishment activism to far-right extremism. Analyzing their use within different movements provides insights into the strategies, ideologies, and tactics employed by activists and cultural influencers. Pepe the Frog's evolution from an innocuous cartoon character to a symbol of hate highlights the complexities of identity and representation in digital culture. Exploring Pepe's journey helps us understand how symbols can be appropriated, transformed, and contested in the digital age. Studying Banksy's art and Pepe memes promotes media literacy by encouraging critical thinking, analysis, and interpretation of visual culture. By engaging with these cultural artifacts, individuals develop skills to navigate and evaluate the vast array of images and messages encountered in contemporary media environments. In summary, discussing Banksy and Pepe the Frog is important because it provides valuable insights into contemporary art, culture, politics, and technology, helping us navigate the complexities of the modern world and understand the forces that shape our society. Banksy's street art and Pepe the Frog memes cannot generally be said to represent contemporary forms of propaganda, but they do use digital technology, humor and subversion to engage

audiences and deliver messages. Although they share some similarities with traditional propaganda techniques, they also embody unique characteristics that set them apart and make them particularly effective in the modern media environment.

## 6.8. Future Directions

In addition, we cannot ignore the fact that, although there is literature about both Banksy's art, Pepe the Frog, and the world of Internet memes are topics in themselves that could be delved deeper into. As I mentioned above, there are several reasons why these topics are worth addressing. Both themes are very rich and multifaceted, with many areas that are untouched or only slightly affected.

In Banksy's case would be needed further investigation into how Banksy's artwork influences the perception and utilization of urban spaces, including the reactions of local communities, authorities, and tourists. In addition, exploring the ethical and legal considerations surrounding street art, including questions of property rights, vandalism, and freedom of expression. It could be an interesting and gap filling area to examine the psychological effects of encountering Banksy's art in public spaces, such as its impact on mood, perception, and social behavior. As well as investigating Banksy's influence on contemporary art practices, including the adoption of street art techniques by mainstream artists and the commodification of street art in the art market. Analyzing Banksy's role in shaping political discourse and public opinion through his artwork, including its effectiveness as a tool for social commentary and activism.

More research is needed to understand how Pepe the Frog and other Internet memes influence society and how people in different cultures and communities react to them. It would be important to conduct further research on how political actors and groups use Internet memes, such as Pepe the Frog, to spread political messages and gain support. Moreover, examining the role and impact of Pepe the Frog and other Internet memes in the formation and strengthening of online identities and communities could be another important area of research. It is needed to understand how social media platforms attempt to manage and moderate the content of Internet memes and how this affects the spread and use of memes. It would be important to carry out further research on the role of memes in creative processes, as well as the innovations they bring about in terms of Internet culture and art.



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