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“Web 3.0” Memes: Utilising Deepfake Technology to Create Memes

In the digital popular lore of social networking, commentary on current events and behaviours perceived negatively by users is often expressed through a ‘new’ genre of folklore: memes. However, like many elements that spread through social media, memes became a ‘trend,’ and trends frequently ebb and flow or are replaced by new ones. As a result, memes are now sometimes considered outdated.

A defining feature of digital lore, though, is its adaptability to new technologies. With the advent of Web 3.0, memes, which were once static and text-based, have evolved their morphological features. Animation has become the dominant mode, and memes are now predominantly shared through platforms like TikTok and vertical videos on various social media. A current trend in this evolving meme culture is the use of deepfakes.

Deepfake technology, a type of artificial intelligence, is used to create highly convincing fake images, videos, and audio recordings. The term “deepfake” comes from a combination of “deep learning” and “fake.” Despite its often threatening implications and the technical expertise it requires, deepfake technology has recently been used frequently to parody or comment on politicians and figures involved in current affairs.

This practice has led to the creation of a new type of meme that, while retaining the central characteristics of ‘traditional’ memes, has evolved by leveraging cutting-edge technology, thus ensuring the genre remains dynamic and relevant in the digital vernacular.

Keywords: Digital folklore, memes, deepfakes, digital popular lore, TikTok

Мимови на „Вебу 3.0”: коришћење „дипфејк” технологије за креирање мимова

У популарном дигиталном предању друштвених мрежа, коментари на догађаје и понашања који се перципирају негативно од стране корисника често се изражавају кроз 'нови' жанр фолклора: мимове. Па ипак, као многи елементи који се шире путем друштвених медија, мимови често постају 'тренд', а они најчешће надиру и повлаче се, или их одмењују нови. Резултат овога је да се неки мимови данас сматрају застарелим.

Главна особина дигиталног фолклора, међутим, јесте његова прилагодљивост новим технологијама. Са напретком Веба 3.0, мимови, који су некада били статични и засновани на тексту, еволуирали су и њихове морфолошке одлике су се измениле. Анимација је постала доминантни облик, а мимови се сада највише деле путем платформи као што је Тикток, и вертикални видеи на различитим друштвеним медијима. Тренутно актуелни тренд у овој еволуирајућој мим-култури јесте употреба „дипфејк” технологије.

Ова технологија је тип вештачке интелигенције и користи се за креирање лажних слика, видео и аудио снимака који изгледају врло убедљиво. Термин „дипфејк” („deepfake”) долази од комбинације „deep learning” („дубоко учење”) и „fake” („лажно”). И поред често претећих импликација и техничке експертизе коју ова врста технологије захтева, дипфејк технологија се, у последње време, често користи ради пародије или коментарисања политичара или других личности присутних у јавном животу и савременим догађајима.

Ова пракса довела је до настанка новог типа мимова који су, иако су задржали основне карактеристике 'традиционалних' мимова, еволуирали употребљавајући најновију технологију, и тако обезбедили да жанр остане динамичан и релевантан у дигиталном вернакулару.

Кључне речи: дигитални фолклор, мимови, дипфејк, популарно дигитално предање, Тикток

INTRODUCTION

Digital folklore represents an emerging field that explores how cultural expressions evolve in the digital realm. It is widely regarded as a vital subset of contemporary folklore studies as well as a significant element within

contemporary urban folklore studies. This field not only reimagines traditional cultural expressions in the digital era but also serves as a vibrant space where new folklore is actively produced. Online entertainment and digital artistic expressions now offer rich material for multi-level analysis, inviting researchers to explore these phenomena from both folkloric and broader anthropological perspectives. Varvounis & Kouzas (2019, 367–369) emphasize that understanding these digital forms requires an analytical framework that can capture their complex, layered nature, thereby underscoring the evolving relationship between traditional folklore and modern urban cultural expressions. In this context, memes have gained recognition as powerful carriers of contemporary cultural narratives and humour. Trevor Blank¹ is a pioneering figure in this area, credited as the first to approach memes from the perspective of folklore studies and to lay the groundwork for digital folklore research.²

In Greece, folklore studies have been shifting their focus towards the digital sphere for over a decade now, albeit gradually and with significant effort. Early contributors such as Gkasouka and Foulidi³ were among the first to write on digital folklore in Greece. Their work paved the way

¹ In his influential 2009 book, *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in the Digital World*, Blank laid the groundwork for understanding how digital platforms facilitate the evolution of folklore. His subsequent 2012 paper, "Pattern in the Virtual Folk Culture of Computer-Mediated Communication," further explored the patterns and dynamics inherent in digital communication as modern folk culture. Complementing these efforts, Frank (2011) in *Newslore: Contemporary Folklore on the Internet* provides additional insights into the emergence and circulation of contemporary folklore online.

² The role of the internet as a space for the dissemination of folk culture has been well-documented through numerous studies in recent decades. Early research in digital folklore, including works by Dorst (1990, 179-190), Howard (1997, 295-315; 2005a, 172-188; 2005b, 323-360), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, 281-327), Fernback (2003, 29-45), Frank (2004, 633-658), Dundes (2005, 385-408), and Blank (2007, 15-26), examined how pre-digital folk practices—such as jokes and chain letters (which were originally circulated by mail before being adapted as emails)—expanded and evolved within the new digital medium of the internet. These studies collectively demonstrated not only that folklore exists online but also that digital media present both opportunities and challenges for the future of folklore studies (Peck 2020, 3-23).

Howard (2008, 194), critiquing some of these early approaches, argued that the goal of digital folklore research should be to explore the processes of group formation that emerge, persist, and are reshaped through the dissemination of folk culture in this digital environment.

Over the past decade, the field has expanded significantly, incorporating studies on topics such as online religious expression, contemporary and urban legends, humour and memes, virtual worlds and blogging, fake news, social movements, and the intersections of folk and popular culture.

³ See Gasouka & Foulidi (2012).

for further academic exploration, with Katsadoros⁴ also enriching the related bibliography. Notably, Aphrodite-Lidia Nounanaki⁵ dedicated her research exclusively to this field and was the first in Greece to publish a paper on memes from the folklore studies perspective, in collaboration with George Katsadoros.⁶

INTRODUCTION TO MEMES IN DIGITAL LORE

Memes serve as a new genre of cultural expression, evolving alongside the social and technological landscapes. Originally, memes were simple: plane texts, or static images overlaid with text, often humorous, expressing shared cultural references. They gained traction as a fast and effective means of communication, shaping and reflecting trends on social media. Their adaptability is a defining feature, reflecting the fast-paced changes of digital life. However, as digital culture evolves, memes also adapt, ensuring their continued relevance and ability to comment on society.

FROM STATIC TO DYNAMIC MEMES

The journey of memes from simple, static images⁷ to dynamic, highly engaging visual content, as are those we are going to talk about in this paper, is marked by the influence of Web 3.0, the 'semantic web', in which the emphasis is on the information and no longer on the source. The early forms of meme, which we still see today, became the template for how social commentary could be shared quickly and virally. However, the advent of Web 3.0 and a more interactive internet experience in which Artificial Intelligence (AI) also falls into (Foroughi, Yan, Shi, & Chong, 2015, 216-232), led to a shift from static to animated and video-based memes.

According to Joly (2002, 36), the image is a communication tool, it is a point that expresses ideas through a dynamic process of induction and interpretation. What characterizes the image is not mainly its materiality, but its mechanism, its analogy and its relationship with the represented. Images, static or moving, are also a way to "tell a story", i.e. the image works as discourse, since it is a communication tool as Barthes has shown,

⁴ See Katsadoros, G. (2013, 99-122).

⁵ See indicatively Nounanaki& Kakampoura (2022, 61-78), Kakampoura & Nounanaki (2022, 46-78), Nounanaki & Kakampoura (2021, 125-139), and Nounanaki (2024, 1-20).

⁶ Katsadoros & Nounanaki (2021, 389-432).

⁷ According to Shifman (2014, 110-112) the first prominent manifestation of "image macros" were the so called LOLCats. The spike in this genre's popularity is associated with the image-posting board. On the Greek internet some such examples are Mimidia Eís Tin Ellinikín, The real ancient memes...etc).

and, since it is a given that everyday communication in the digital age is increasingly visual (Broner 2009, 29), it becomes apparent that the promotion of ideas through images is prevailing.

INTRODUCTION TO DEEPAKE TECHNOLOGY

The way images are produced in digital environments develops alongside the technical developments in this context. Therefore, through web 3.0, new possibilities are opening up in this area, due to the integration of AI into everyday use.

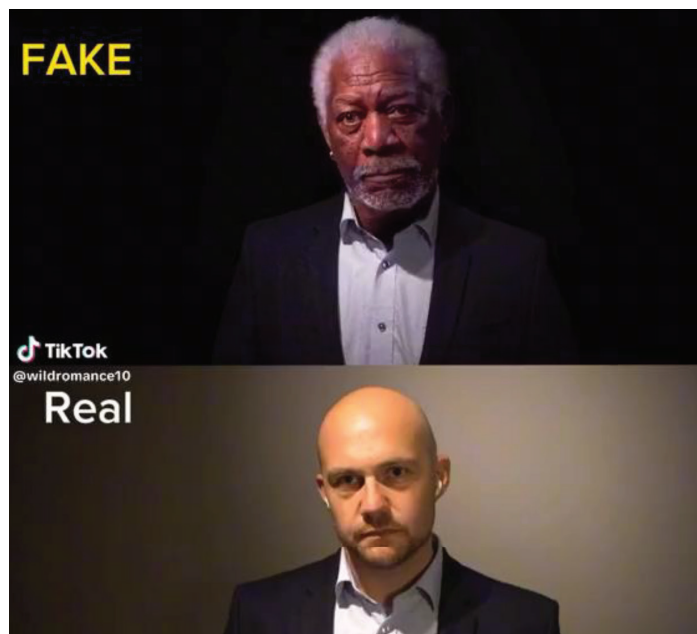
Deepfake technology represents a significant technological advancement in the realm of digital content creation. The term "deepfake" merges "deep learning" and "fake," referencing the sophisticated AI techniques used to produce highly realistic but fabricated images, videos, or audio clips. At its core, deepfake technology utilizes neural networks to learn and replicate the nuances of human features, voice patterns, and mannerisms. These algorithms analyse vast amounts of data to convincingly swap faces or voices, making it difficult for the average viewer to discern that the content is not authentic (Mirsky & Lee 2021, 1-2). In the following example the way deepfake function is shown. The person in the bottom part of the picture is the model that AI follows to create a video of the actor Morgan Freeman. The fake Morgan Freeman not only looks realistic, but also speaks with the actor's voice making it impossible to recognise the 'fraud'.

Thus, a common example is a deepfake video where a celebrity appears to deliver a speech they never gave, or a political figure that is shown saying something out of character. This practice can be idiosyncratically interpreted through the Bakhtinian concept of "voicing"⁸.

These strikingly realistic creations have sparked significant intrigue and concern, given their potential impact, because this technology can be exploited as a means of creating fake news with severe political consequences.

Still, for fun and popular use there are even apps the users can utilize to create their own deepfakes, using, of course, a more comprehensible and simplified version of this technology, that has, as expected, lower quality results.

⁸ Bakhtin (1981, 279) proposed the concepts of 'voice' and 'voicing' to describe the tendency of people expressing a point of view through language to borrow and incorporate the words of others, even when they don't mention them verbatim. In this case it's not the word of others, rather than the image of others speaking words they never did. Thus, the concept of voicing is, in this case, perceived in a peculiar way.



<https://www.tiktok.com/@wildromance10/video/7266665964429708545?q=deepfake&t=1730889156714>⁹

Fig. No 1

DEEPPAKES IN MEMES: A NEW FRONTIER

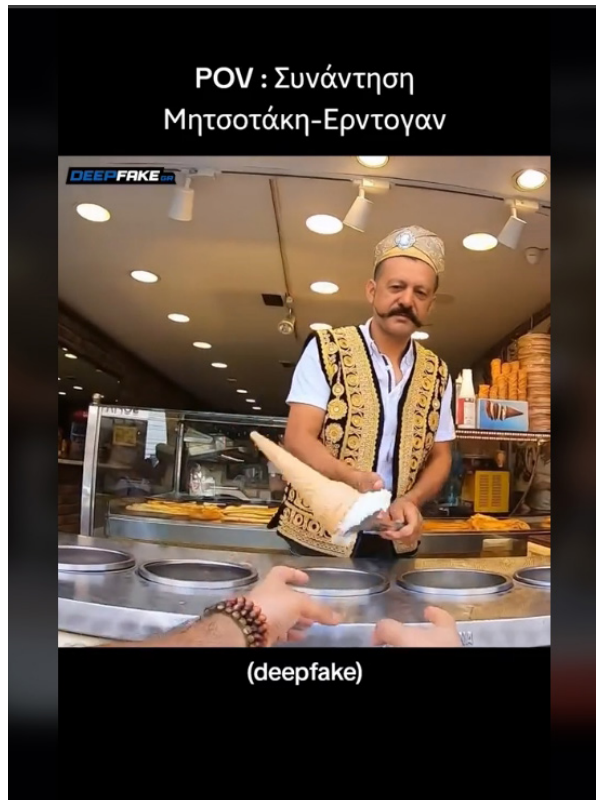
The integration of deepfake technology into meme culture has created a new and engaging frontier. These deepfake memes capitalize on AI's ability to realistically mimic faces and voices, enabling creators to develop content that is humorous, satirical, or critical. To be accurate, calling the technology used in memes deepfake is a rather emic term. Memes are typically a form of "shallowfake." A shallowfake is a type of media manipulation that doesn't involve sophisticated artificial intelligence or machine learning. Instead, it uses simple video editing tools to alter or create content. This approach, being less technically demanding, is more accessible to the general public, making it widely used. However, the simpler, manual process behind shallowfakes often leads to less convincing results compared to deepfakes. Unlike the increasingly realistic, AI-generated deepfakes, shallowfakes involve manipulations that vary in quality,

⁹ All links were last retrieved on 21/11/2024.

from somewhat convincing to blatantly fake. In some cases, shallowfakes might even consist of original images or videos that have been repurposed with a new label or subtly altered to change their interpretation—such as slowing down a video's frame rate to create a different impression. Shallowfakes are particularly suited for meme creation, unlike deepfakes, which focus on achieving realism. In fact, with shallowfakes like memes, the further they deviate from reality, the more impactful they often become in spreading online and influencing behaviour (Yankoski, Scheirer, & Weninger 2021, 119).

Still, despite the fact that there is a prevailing difference between them, given the fact that Deepfakes strive for realism, leveraging cutting-edge AI to blur the line between real and fake and Shallowfakes rely on simplicity and speed often focusing more on emotional or viral impact than on fooling viewers completely, the term "*deepfake*" has become a buzzword for any form of digital manipulation, even if it doesn't involve the AI technology associated with true deepfakes. Using the term "*deepfake*" adds intrigue and a sense of technological sophistication, which can make the content more shareable or noteworthy. The label might stick even if the meme itself doesn't fit the strict definition of a deepfake. Of course, in some cases, memes do use elements of deepfake technology (e.g., swapping faces or altering audio) but in a humorous or exaggerated way. These could arguably straddle the line between true deepfakes and memes, making the term somewhat valid in those contexts.

Leaving aside the issue of correct terminology, let's turn our attention back to how this sort of technology is leveraged in the case of memes. One popular use is face-swapping in videos, where usually a well-known person is humorously placed in absurd or exaggerated scenarios. Another is the creation of fictional clips in which public figures appear to say or do things they never did, adding an element of satire or social and political commentary. One such case is the following deepfake meme, where the outcome of a meeting between the Greek and the Turkish prime ministers is being criticised. The face of the ice cream maker is replaced with that of the Turkish prime minister. In the original video, the ice cream man teases his customer, who is trying to get an ice cream. But, through the change of faces, the attitude of the Turkish Prime ministers is commented on, and the playful 'misleading' of the customer turns into a political comment. Of course, the descriptive text above the image, a characteristic element of 'traditional' memes, helps to make the message clearer.



<https://www.tiktok.com/@deepfakegr7/video/7368782372218686752>

Fig. No 2

These memes maintain the traditional objective of humour and critique but add a new layer of visual realism, making them more compelling and shareable. Examples include viral deepfake memes that humorously mimic politicians or celebrities, generating conversations about current events and/or cultural norms. By parodying or commenting on social and political issues, these memes reach massive audiences and spark conversation. The realism of deepfakes amplifies the humour and makes these memes more engaging, ensuring that they stay relevant and captivating.

The following example depicts a supposed interview of Trump on his experience at the border, certainly underscoring his great obsession with the immigration issue. After the video, 'documents' from his visit are presented.



https://www.tiktok.com/@luchorivers_theaiguy/video/7268096298467757354?q=deep%20fake%20trump&t=1730889550572
Fig. No 3

Using the previous example, the difference between deepfakes and AI generated images can be referred to.¹⁰ The previous example contains both. The deepfake is the first part, where Trump is shown to answer to the 'reporter' and the AI generated part is where he is wearing the orange suit. The second part is significantly more artificial looking as the first, which underlines, even in this simplistic way, the different technology used in each case.

PLATFORMS DOMINATED BY DEEPPAKE MEMES

Platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have played a critical role in this evolution. They prioritize short, visually captivating content, making animated memes and videos more popular. These platforms have not only accelerated the spread of memes but also reshaped how memes are created and consumed, demanding more creativity and visual appeal.

This particular research is based on hashtags (#) in all social media, through which several random videos like this and lots of repost were lo-

¹⁰ AI technologies have been exploited to the full in the production of videos by users for entertainment purposes on social media. One such example was the culmination of creepypasta in AI video creations with scary content or the rendition of well-known urban/contemporary legends.

cated. The research was conducted on the 'Greek internet'¹¹ and focused eventually on TikTok, on which two accounts dealing with the creation of deepfakes were spotted, these accounts are DEEPFAKEgr and anthipan-erokopos. They deal mostly with videos in which all the central political figures of the time are commented on. In the description of the first account, as shown in the picture below, it is mentioned that *We make deepfake videos and A.I. stuff.*Τα βίντεο είναι αποτέλεσμα επεξεργασίας!*, making it clear what its content is all about.

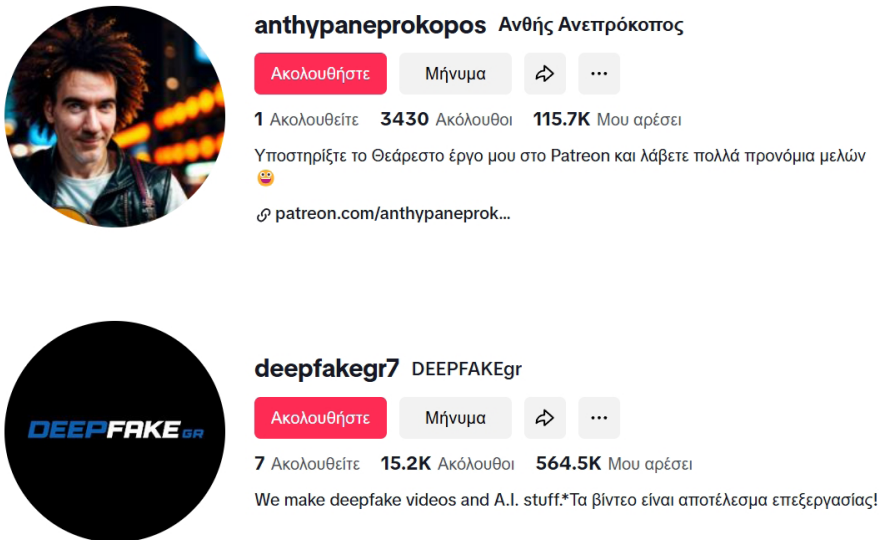


Fig 4a and 4b

The fact that we finally focused our research on TikTok is a consequence of its particular preference by the users. This means that whatever content is distributed in the other 'short video content' of the rest of the platforms, have in their majority been primarily created or uploaded on TikTok and then posted elsewhere.

The factual material gathered for this case study,¹² through long-term digital folklore research was analyzed using a dual approach. Firstly, a

¹¹ On the issue of 'local internet' see Kakampoura & Nounanaki (2023, 75-77).

¹² A case study has been described as an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community, or some other unit in which the researcher examines in depth data related to various variables (Woods & Calanzaro 1980).

morphological analysis was conducted to examine the incorporation of deep-fake technology in meme creation, as well as the integration of widely recognized elements from popular culture. Secondly, interpretive analysis¹³ was employed to identify and interpret the thematic patterns presented within the material. Additionally, an analysis of user comments was undertaken to highlight audience engagement, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which these memes are received and circulated.

THEMES AND NATURE OF DEEPPFAKE MEMES

One of the earliest explorations of memes as a distinct genre comes from Shifman (2014), who argues that while the internet theoretically enables free and unique creativity, in practice, meme creators tend to follow familiar, well-trodden paths. She refers to these paths as **meme genres**, which she defines as "socially recognized types of communicative action." Meme genres, like traditional genres, are characterized by shared structures, styles, themes, and target audiences.

Drawing from Jean Burgess's (2008, 101–109) concept of **vernacular creativity**—everyday artistic practices made more visible through digital media—Shifman (2014, 100) emphasizes how meme genres transform private, mundane activities into public cultural expressions. By shaping group identities and defining social boundaries, these genres highlight the collective and participatory nature of online culture.

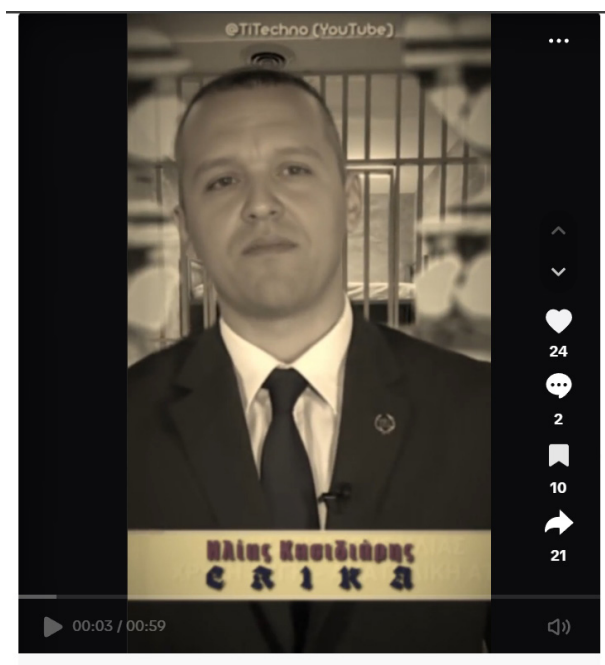
Shifman (2014, 99–118) argues that meme genres can be divided into three categories: first, those documenting "real-life" moments, like photo fads and flash mobs, rooted in physical spaces. Second, genres that manipulate mass media content, such as reaction Photoshops and lipdubs, which remix pop culture to express both admiration and critique. Lastly, genres based on digital content, like LOLCats and rage comics, which create a complex system of signs understood by those familiar with meme culture.

Building on Shifman's insights into meme genres and their role in shaping online culture, the emergence of 'deepfake memes' marks a new phase in meme evolution, introducing distinct morphological and thematic complexities. Sometimes, deepfake memes exemplify this playful spirit, aligning with Lipovetsky's (2009, 117–147) view of humour as a light-hearted and non-critical form of connection in an era of extreme individualism and social differentiation. Many deepfake memes use humour to poke fun at celebrities or reference cultural moments. Examples

¹³ See on Wiesner (2022).

include putting politicians in pop culture scenes or making public figures lip-sync popular songs.¹⁴

One very successful such example of a Greek politician lip-syncing is the case of Ilias Kasidiaris, a well-known far-right fascist political figure of the country, who in the meme appears as a German Nazi soldier and sings a well-known Nazi song. The description of this video is significantly satirical: *the melodious German military song, as performed by Elias from Domoko prisons.*



<https://www.tiktok.com/@anthypaneprokopos/video/7313231781342285089>

Fig. No 5

¹⁴ As Shifman (2014, 105-107) mentions, these sort of memes pre-existed in the typical memes as well. Lipsynch (or lipdub) videos feature individuals or groups syncing their lip movements to popular songs. The rise of the internet, personal webcams, and editing software has made this genre widely popular. Lipsynching now includes two main subgenres: bedroom lipdubs, typically filmed by a few participants in private settings, and collective lipdubs, often linked to public events or organizations. Both types reflect a mix of fame and anonymity, central to participatory culture. Lipdubs reappropriate mass-mediated songs, originally performed by professionals, by local, amateur communities.

Examples of pop culture scenes, or better described, popular pop culture figures, replacing local counterparts in popular scenes from Greek movies and TV, are depicted in the following examples. In the first of them, the face and voice of the action movies actor Sylvester Stallone 'replaced' that of a Greek popular and loved singer from the 70's, Tolis Voskopoulos. They are both very known and recognisable and have very characteristic voices, thus, listening to Stallone singing Voskopoulos's songs, makes this meme hilarious, along with the fact that Voskopoulos songs are mostly soft with themes that mainly revolve around love and romance, while Stallone is known for his participation mainly in violent or action films. So, these two people are, admittedly, different, and their association adds to the fun of the meme. The second example follows the same pattern, in which the face of the well-known actor Arnold Schwarzenegger takes the place of a Greek actress from the 1960s named Aliki Vougiouklaki. She is widely known to the Greek public for her sweetness and femininity, thus, putting Schwarzenegger in her 'place', who is known for his masculinity, creates a sharp contradiction and makes the meme funny.



<https://www.tiktok.com/@anthypaneprokopos/video/7411127048539835680>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@anthypaneprokopos/video/7418541049653529889>

Fig. No 6

Still, deepfake memes mostly serve as a powerful tool for social and political critique, and their impact goes beyond humour to engage in deeper societal commentary. Memes thus, arise often from the creative appropriation of visual content, where politics serves as a platform for expression (Jensen et al. 2020· Seiffert-Brockmann et al. 2018). In most cases, politicians replace the main characters of popular movies, or that of a broadly known incident captured on camera. These memes often appeal to audiences who appreciate visual humour and can identify the reference points (movies, TV shows, or trending topics). One such example is the following one, on which a young man who gave an interview in the 1990s about the effect of psychoactive drugs on him, whose signature phrase is "I see circles", is being 'replaced' by the former opposition leader (A. Tsipras) who had been the country's former prime minister. This is an indicative commentary on the specific politician, but in order to perceive it as a joke, one must know the original video.

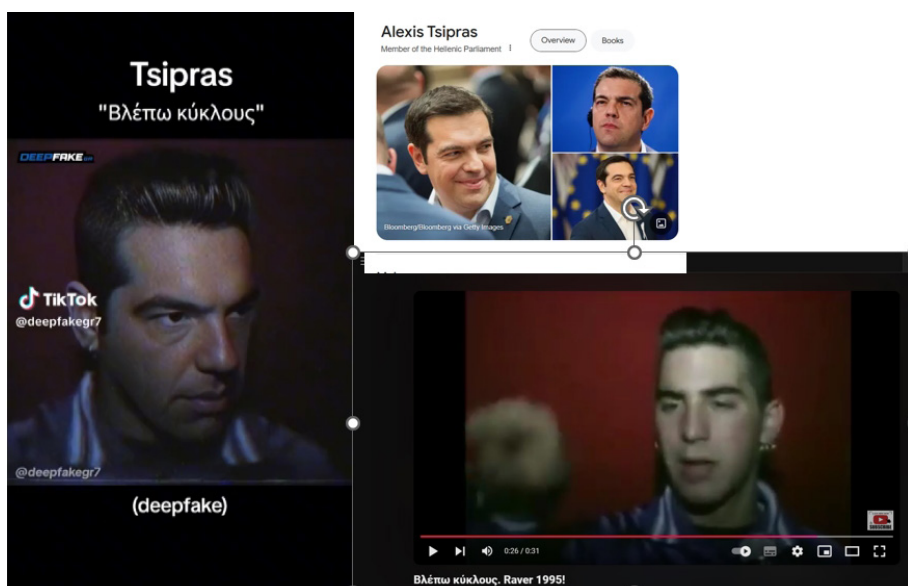


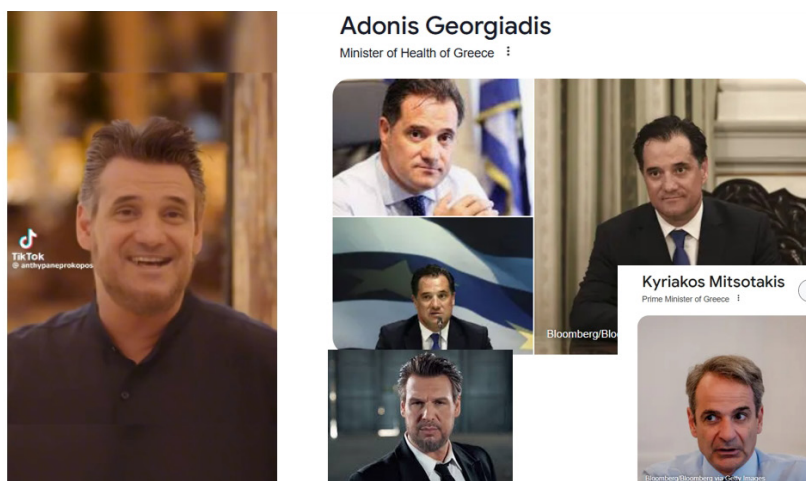
Fig. No 7

By making politicians look foolish, deepfake memes can weaken the public's perception of their authority, or just highlight the way the public feels about them.

Memes continue the tradition of political humour, which has long supported democratic public culture by exposing power hypocrisy and

testing free speech (Chen et al., 2017; Hariman, 2008). Unlike traditional forms like political cartoons, memes are part of participatory digital culture, created and shared by anonymous users outside institutional contexts (Ross & Rivers 2017; Shifman 2013; Wiggins & Bowers 2015). Their constantly evolving content reflects collective creativity, a hallmark of internet culture (Jenkins, 2006). This fluidity often makes their political messages more ambiguous, but humour in memes fosters both inclusion and exclusion—strengthening group identity among those who “get the joke” while alienating others (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021, 2368-2369).

The following example is ridiculing the health minister (A. Georgiadis), who is considered a particularly opportunistic politician and is mostly disliked by the general public due to his completely populist stance. He is also considered the prime minister's minion, and this is the main issue commented on by this video, on which his face is placed on that of a popular Greek singer, Panos Kiamos, in a video-clip of a song of her. The video has been staged to make it appear that the singer addresses the song to the girl in the yellow dress, whose face is replaced by that of the prime minister. It seems now as if the health minister sings to the prime minister: *I touch you and get an electric shock, Shik Shak Shock, Shik Shak Shock, I see you approaching and the stop lights are on Shik Shak Shock Shik Shak Shock.*



https://www.tiktok.com/@anthypaneprokopos/video/7427831744050629910?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7416757491918997014

Fig. No 8

Every meme, however, is a complex and nonstandard form of internet vernacular, celebrated by its users as a new one born from online culture (Shifman 2014, 111). Still, enjoying the genre feels like being part of an inside joke, not only because of the shared digital environment but also due to the cultural references and local incidents that often shape the memes. These references can be drawn from particular people, events, or issues that are recognizable primarily to users from the same region or cultural background. Still, if memes were already perceived as a means for internet users to express their thoughts using visual metaphors, and if understanding them required recognizing and interpreting visual metaphors with respect to the text inside or around them (Hwang & Shwartz 2023, 1433–1445), creating and interpreting deepfake memes requires also navigating the layers of realism introduced by AI. These memes often demand a deeper level of reasoning and background knowledge to decode their meaning, as the realistic imagery challenges viewers' perceptions and blurs the line between humour, critique, and manipulation.

In the examples from the Greek deepfake memes, the main politicians being commented on are the prime minister, the new head of the opponent party (S. Kasselakis) and some of the most active politicians whose behaviors are characteristically intense and exaggerated, as shown in the following examples. On this example, several deepfake memes are to be seen, on which the faces and voices of popular singers have been replaced by those of politicians, who also took the places of actors of very popular movies and TV series. The prime minister's face, p.e. has 'replaces' that of Marina Sati, a currently very popular pop singer in the first picture and the face of the leader of the official opposition replaced that of Mitch Buickanon, from the Baywatch series! The one example that differs, is that where the face of the Greek prime minister is replaced by that of the actor Rowan Atkinson, who's most popular role was that of Mr. Bean from the TV series. This character was known for his clumsiness and his goofy character; thus, this shift makes the meme's message a political critic on the prime ministers' phrase that is posted over the picture and seas 'we became paradise', referring to the life of the citizens in Greece.

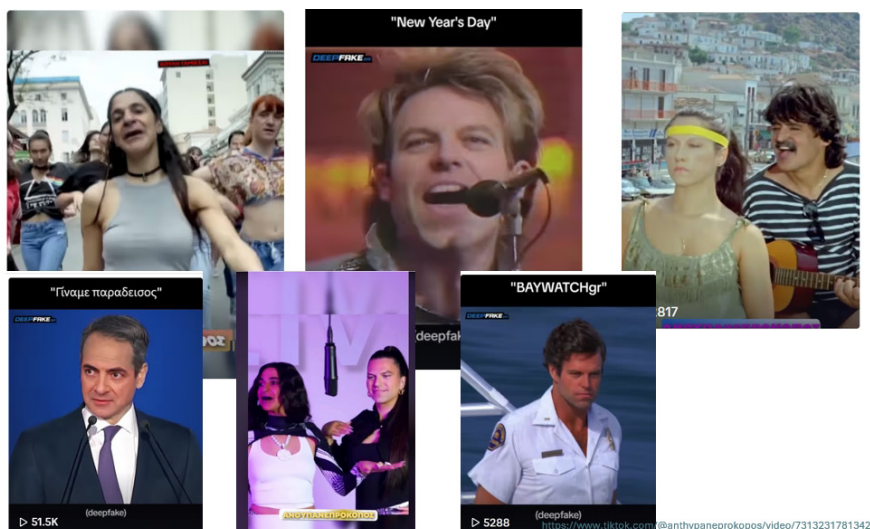


Fig. No 9

It seems thus, that deepfake memes become a vehicle for dissent, as they did from the beginning, and they still target politicians and politics.¹⁵ By mocking or undermining the official narratives presented by politicians, these memes provide a way for people to express discontent and challenge dominant ideologies. Unlike traditional media, which may be censored or influenced by political forces, meme culture thrives on the internet's relative freedom.

Political memes are deeply connected to both the construction of power and the broader political landscape. They serve as a tool for political participation, offering an accessible and enjoyable way for individuals to express opinions and critique governance. They are often designed to make a point in normative debates about societal direction and policy. As bottom-up expressions, memes provide a space for public discussion and alternative views, reflecting the values of participation and critique. While memes have long been a means of subverting authority, their digital form amplifies their reach, turning personal critiques into public performances (Shifman 2014, 99).

The politics of memes emerge from their playful appropriations of contexts, blending the political with the humorous. Sicart (2014, 71–72) empha-

¹⁵ This 'tradition' is long, let's not forget that Trump, the first time he got elected as the president of the US, was called the meme president, because he became the subject of many memes. See e.g. Denisova 2019; Peters & Allan 2021.

sizes that play's appropriative nature fosters creativity, enabling critical engagement with political contexts. Political memes often subvert mainstream cultural forms, as they are shared, decontextualized, and recontextualized (Mortensen 2017). This aligns with Sicart's (2014, 80) view of playfulness¹⁶ as a tool for critical and creative expression, producing double-edged meanings that combine humour and critique (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021, 2369).

The difference is that, before engaging the AI technologies is that now every user can make their own memes, because until this moment, there were specific platforms/image-posting boards that turned clever lines posted online into memes. One such examples from the Greek internet, is the following facebook page, in which description it is clearly mentioned that its aim is to poste "falsa, statements that remained statements and the best of Twitter. The best on the internet". Still, while deepfake memes can effectively criticize power, there is a risk of oversimplifying complex political issues. The satirical and playful tone of memes often softens the negative arguments in political memes (Ross & Rivers 2017, 1-11), offering an alternative way to critique political figures or decisions beyond direct denunciation, reflecting a key aspect of meme and internet culture (Massanari 2015; Shifman 2013).

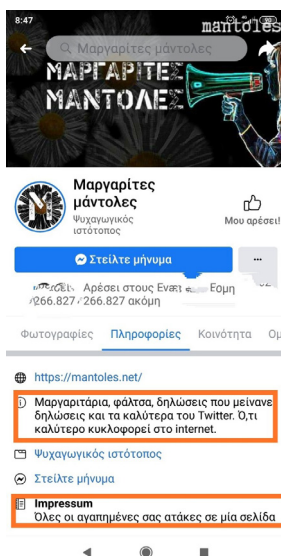
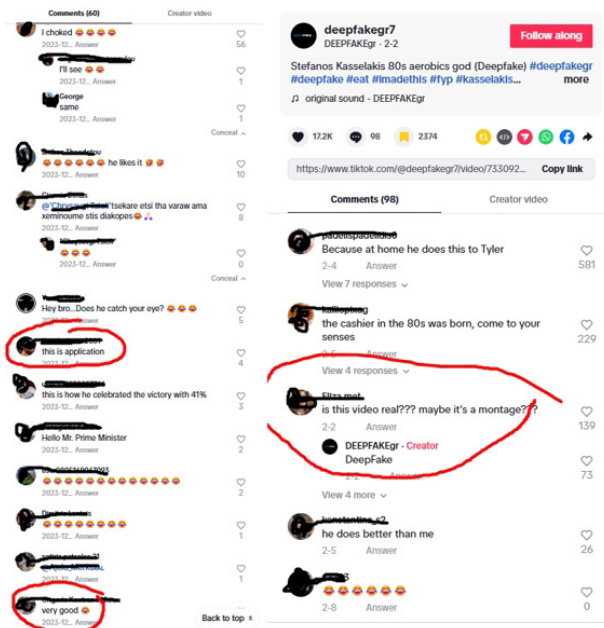


Fig. No 10
https://www.facebook.
com/MargaritesMantoles

¹⁶ Sicart's playfulness differs from the one described by Huizinga. In *Homo Ludens* (1938), Huizinga makes the case that the ability and appetite for play is a defining characteristic of humanity. Huizinga describes play as an essential pillar of civilization, present in our art, our law, and even in our war.

THE WAY USERS REACT TO THESE MEMES

Research on contemporary Internet memes highlights the central role of intertextuality in eliciting strong emotional responses (e.g., Huntington 2013; Makhortykh and (González-Aguilar 2020), indicating that image-based memes (image macros) are likely to provoke stronger emotions than textual ones. Similarly, studies show that richer modalities, such as images and videos, are more effective at evoking emotions compared to text (Bleike 2018). These modalities are processed less systematically (Booth-Butterfield and Gutowski 1993) and are often perceived as more credible (Sundar et al. 2021). These findings align with the MAIN model (2008), which suggests that richer modalities tend to be processed more heuristically than text-based ones (Molina 2023, 1-24). The reactions from other users watching these deepfake memes shows exactly that! They mostly laugh about the ability to ridicule politicians and the efficiency of AI to do so, rather than actually comment on the reasons why they agree to them being ridiculed, because of their political acts.



<https://www.tiktok.com/@rosptyv/video/7312058366111649057>
https://www.tiktok.com/@deepfakegr7/video/7330923781323640097?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7416757491918997014
 Fig. No 11

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCERNS

Despite their entertainment value, the rise of deepfake memes brings about serious ethical concerns. The technology behind deepfakes is powerful and can be used to spread misinformation, create defamatory content, or manipulate public perception. The line between a humorous deepfake meme and harmful, misleading content is often blurry, following Poe's law, which states that without clear context, satire and serious expressions can be indistinguishable, is reflected in the visual nature of memes, which are often open to multiple readings. This ambiguity allows for various interpretations, blurring the line between genuine and satirical content (Dynel 2021, 175-179).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, memes have evolved from simple, static images into dynamic forms of digital expression. The integration of technologies like deepfake AI has amplified this transformation, creating a new wave of memes that blend humour with striking realism. These deepfake memes are a powerful tool for critiquing politicians and dominant narratives, democratizing political expression by making it accessible and engaging. However, they also carry the risks of spreading misinformation and eroding trust in public figures, posing both a challenge to political stability and a form of digital resistance.

The increasing visual nature of digital memes has two contrasting effects. It promotes closer integration between politics and pop culture, as memes often incorporate recognizable symbols, celebrities, and references from popular media. This makes political messages more accessible and engaging, especially to digitally immersed audiences. Despite that, the visual format allows memes to cross linguistic and national borders with ease. While this makes them widely shareable, their interpretation varies depending on cultural and social contexts. Localization adapts memes with local slang or settings, but it also opens the door to misinterpretation when these cues are unfamiliar to certain audiences. Thus, the ambiguity of visual humour can sometimes lead to what is known as Poe's Law, where it becomes difficult to distinguish satire from sincere expressions of extreme views. A meme intended as satire may be taken literally, potentially spreading misinformation or amplifying extreme ideas unintentionally.

It is a given by now, that memes provide a space for users to express fears and anxieties about challenging events or daily life. Their satirical tone allows these concerns to be 'exorcised' while simultaneously cri-

tiquing hegemonic discourse and societal stereotypes (Kakampoura & Nounanaki 2023, 194). As bottom-up rhetorical actions (Shifman, 2014: 99), memes challenge dominant narratives, but their critique often lacks depth, focusing on immediate issues rather than fostering deeper political interpretations (Kakampoura & Nounanaki 2023, 193).

Nevertheless, while memes have long been a way for expressing dissent, their modern forms, including deepfake memes, represent new possibilities. These creations can reinforce accepted truths or fabricate alternative realities. With the technology now widely accessible, ordinary users can challenge perceived oppression, turning memes into tools for critique and resistance, previously reserved for institutional authorities.

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