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Master's Thesis

2024   **Zuzana Králiková**

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Post-girlboss memes as a form of subversive communication within the Slovak political context

Master's Thesis

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Supervisor: M.Sc. Jan Miessler

Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on   Zuzana Králiková

30.04.2024

References

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Abstract

Taking into consideration the left-oriented theoretical works of Gramsci, Mouffe and Bakhtin, this thesis utilises visual grounded theory methodology to study the content and context of Slovak Instagram memes, specifically the post-girlboss memes. These memes are characterized by their affinity to leftist politics and their alignment with fourth wave feminist intersectional struggle. Utilizing popular culture and online language, post-girlboss memes create a subversive power that disrupts the liberal democratic hegemony of Slovakia.

Abstrakt

S přihlédnutím k levicově orientovaným teoretickým pracím Gramsciho, Mouffe a Bakhtina, tato práce využívá visual grounded theory metodologii ke studiu obsahu a kontextu slovenských instagramových memů, konkrétně postgirlbossových memů. Tyto memy se vyznačují svou afinitou k levicové politice a jejich spojením se čtvrtou vlnou feministického intersekcionálního boje. S využitím populární kultury a online jazyka vytvářejí post-girlboss memy podvratnou moc, která narušuje liberálně demokratickou hegemonii Slovenska.

Keywords

Memes, online culture, hegemony, VTGM, carnivalesque, pop-culture

Klíčová slova

Memy, online kultura, hegemonie, VTGM, karnevalismus, pop-kultura

Title

Post-girlboss memes as a form of subversive communication within the Slovak political context

Název práce

Post-girlboss memy jako forma subversivní komunikace v rámci Slovenského politického kontextu

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

What do Robbie Williams, Ben Shapiro, Sanrio characters and the color pink have in common? They create a story of political self-education, commentary on right-wing politics and perhaps a rectification of girlhood signifiers. What does the discount supermarket Lidl mean to young Slovak girls and how can Barbie DVD movies be used to counter the post-feminist subjectification? All these ideas, cultures and commentaries are contained within the format known as a *meme*, a popularized image combining visual elements with text (Carter 2016). Memes exist on Slovak Instagram accounts as well, in fact, there are dozens of Slovak meme admins, who actively share complex content that contains multitudes of meanings, references and political observations. This thesis presents memes as a rich source of information, specifically in the context of Slovak politics. The goal is to explore the subversive nature of memes in an effort to popularize the study of new online forms of expression and communication. Research into the political impact, online community building and self-expression through memes utilizing elements of popular culture and fourth wave feminism does not exist in the Slovak context yet.

Despite the fact that memes exist as a formulated online concept since 1990s (Shifman 2014), the idea of memes functioning as a form of subversive political communication is fairly new, but not insignificant. We see this in Tenna Foustad Harbo's 2022 work on internet memes as a knowledge practice in social movement (Harbo 2022), or in Petrova's work on meme language (Petrova 2021). Another aspect of meme culture is its role on community building, as suggested by a brief research of Molina and Erlichman (Molina and Erlichman, n.d.).

When it comes to pop culture and its relationship with feminism, research has been done and continues to thrive continuously. One of the dynamic sources of works on such intersection, is the online edited collection of academic articles on the topic, managed by Rhea Ashley Hoskin, PhD (Hoskin, n.d.). The feminist elements of the studied memes in this thesis are defined through the lens of fourth-wave feminism. Works on the position of such within the digital space exists (Jouët 2018), and often consider the national element (Jain 2020), similarly to the intent of this work. However this thesis defines a specific type of a meme creator and a specific meme content that they produce, which is referred to as *post-girlboss*. As this is a term coined by the author of this thesis, no previous research on the terminology exists, especially not in a Slovak context.

Knowing that research has been done on memes and their political implications with the focus on multiple different countries, this thesis brings the study of memes into Slovak perspective. The nature of Slovak democracy presents a fertile volatile ground for research focused on political participation. Are post-girlboss memes truly subversive? What are the implications of these memes on the political make-up of Slovakia, especially on Slovak youth? The hypothesis of this work believes post-girlboss memes to represent an alternative form of expression and criticism of the hegemonical structure of today's Slovakia. Validation of such would imply a new field of study opening up for Slovakia-focused scholars. This thesis aims to bring serious attention to memes and position them as a rich source of data, one that can be used to construct a detailed portrait of Slovak agonistic movements. If this thesis can in fact prove the importance of these memes, the same methodology can be done to research memes of all political affiliations, and beyond.

The scope of this thesis is limited and controlled, as the online space provides a plethora of resources that continuously appear, grow, and change. Too wide of a research scope would prove to be challenging to cover within the confines of this work. Therefore, only posts from 2022 and the first half of 2023 from accounts which refer to girlboss-ism in their profile biography were studied. This way the research had an exhaustive source of information and could reach (theoretical) data saturation. As this thesis had been written in the span of two years (2022 to 2024), certain frustrations can appear when one sees the chosen meme pages reacting to political events in real time. The methodology chosen for this work, visual grounded theory methodology, specifically aims to analyse multi-faceted data (which combine the visual and the textual). It is also necessary to acknowledge that accounts which do not refer to girlboss-ism in their biography explicitly can still fall under the category based on different criteria- therefore the data saturation referred to previously is considered a theoretical one. It satisfies the needs of this thesis but only with the acknowledgment of its shortcoming in covering all of the content available online.

This thesis is divided into five sections[1]. Firstly, a theoretical background is introduced, relying on three main authors – Mouffe, Bakhtin and Gramsci. In the second chapter the theory chosen for this thesis is contextualised in terms of locality (Slovakia, online spaces), politics, feminism and popular culture impact. Next the methodology used for the research segment is introduced. As visual grounded theory methodology is a rather new

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[1] Excluding the introduction and conclusion.

concept, the steps of such proceeding are meticulously described. The largest portion of this work is dedicated to the research of chosen meme dataset, its findings and their analysis and interpretation. The fifth chapter focuses on the implications of the research on Slovak society, reflecting on the research questions mentioned above.

1.   Theoretical Approach

The three main voices chosen for the theoretical background of this research are not ones immediately connected to the online spaces. However, it can be argued, that their respective theories apply to the online space as such very well. One of the main reasons why, is because the online, the digital has far surpassed its limitation and it can no longer be separated from the twenty first century human experience[2]. The three theoreticians focused on within this thesis are Alexander Bakhtin, Anton Gramsci and Chantal Mouffe. Their work contained in this chapter will be referenced and explained in the context of the subject of this thesis.

1.1.   Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism

The essence of Mouffe's ideas condensed in her voluminous body or work consists of her pursuit of plurality and agonism in democratic settings. This position is an alternative to the liberal or deliberative democratic models (Mouffe 2000). Two of the prominent proponents of such models that she critiques are Habermas and Rawls, or rather their respective schools of thought on deliberative democracy, which argue for the combination of liberal thought and democracy. As Mouffe states in her 2000 essay (and many more works released before and after), deliberative democracy idealises rationalisation above all. Heavily influenced by westernized thinking, it proposes a modern (already a Eurocentric term), model participant of the democracy, one which separates the public from private. Whilst the private might be a space of emotions, morality even, a space filled with pluralism, these notions do not translate to the public sphere. There are differences to Habermas's and Rawl's work, of course, but they both argue in favour of a (theoretical) existence of a viable, rational, fully achieved democracy. This confidence in objectivity stems from the notion that rational consensus can be achieved through rational consideration- one without exclusion (Mouffe 2000).

Mouffe, however, critiques this approach, as there are undeniable tensions between the ideals of liberal individual rights and democratic form of governance, which cannot be solved

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[2] That is not to say that every human experience in the world occurs in direct interaction with the digital space, but more so to say that the virtual has real life implications on the global order.

(nor should they) through finite rational considerations. Within the abovementioned essay, which channels her work in collaboration with Laclau from 1985 (Mouffe and Laclau 2001),she points out two of her main issues with deliberative democracy. Firstly, the division of public and private, for the sake of containment of plurality does not reflect the democratic values which in fact thrive on multitudes, passions and engagement. Similarly so, in her second point, she critiques the separation of private autonomy from the public one, claiming that both theories fail to isolate the two without compromising the values of democracy as such (Mouffe 2000). Instead, she proposes a theory of plurality and agonism, with a more constructivist approach. Understanding that there is no gap between power and legitimacy, as power is automatically deemed legitimate if recognised as one by a group, or simply not being an aprioristic one, a concept of rationality is terminally refuted. As Mouffe bluntly puts it,

> *''The idea that power could be dissolved through a rational debate and that legitimacy could be based on pure rationality are illusions, which can endanger democratic institutions.''* (Mouffe 2000).

Any objectivity is in fact a social construct, one created by pluralities. That is to say that there is no fully achieved democracy, but rather a continuous process, a power struggle, if you will, to continue to pursue democratic contestation. This contestation should be one of adversaries, rather than enemies or antagonists. Diversity of thought, opinion and passions is crucial for healthy democratic institutions, which are in turn solidified by their civic bond with involved citizens, who pursue democratic language and expression. In her 2013 publication, which seeks to summarise Mouffe's stance, she further expands her definitions, namely those of the political, politics and identity. Especially in the second chapter, which focuses on implications of her theories on international relations, the proposed definition of an identity is explored. Whilst identity is always relational, an outcome of an *us versus them* dichotomy, it does not necessarily need to be antagonistic (Mouffe 2013). Mouffe argues for the plurality of centres, of hegemonies, especially in the European national context of identity. Whilst the project of European Union begun as an effort to pursue agonistic relations within the region, any effort to minimize the importance of national identities proves to be counterproductive, giving rise to more radicalized and possibly anti-democratic ideas. Her focus on the European region, and western world as such does not end there, as she goes on to argue against cosmopolitanism, global notion of democracy, pursue of universal liberal rights (such as the human rights) or secularization. When scholars pursue the idea of a cosmopolitan democratic order, they fail to account for the plurality of the world's societies. Similarly so,

notions of human rights or secularisation, as crucial for a liberal democratic process as they are, are not applicable globally (and as Mouffe stresses continuously, nor should they) (Mouffe 2000).In her later work on leftist populism she leans further into an intersectional approach to democratic struggle, as she uses a study of the western European nations to pursue a more pluralistic approach to populism (Demir 2019).

Importantly for this thesis, Mouffe dedicates an entire chapter of her 2013 publication to the relationship between agonistic plurality and arts. Presenting the current late stage of corporate capitalism (deriving from post-Fordism), the boundaries between the political, intellectual and labour-related no longer exist (or exist in an extremely blurred state). The state of constant (self-) exploitation under capitalism pushes the participants to seek resistance in new ways, such as through new common spaces, practices of living or consumption. Art, then, becomes an organic way to counter the hegemonies, consciously or not (Mouffe 2013). This thesis hence applies Mouffe's logic to the digital space as well, where plurality is indeed visible in new counter-spaces. What is intellectual is also political, artistic and laborious – a constant resistance against the exploitation of one's attention, time, work and more.

1.2.   Bakhtin, carnival, and the grotesque body

Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque is utilized in this thesis as an ontological foundation for understanding new social conditions (social media, memes, aesthetics and so on) and as an analytical lens to perceive power dynamics between the subversive meme content and the hegemonic political discourse (Gardiner 2017). In his work on Rabelais, Bakhtin explores the medieval and renaissant world through the optic of folk culture, specifically through three of its manifestations, which are rituals and spectacles, verbal compositions, and billingsgate respectively (Bakhtin 1984). All three of these are inescapably linked to folk humour and the festivities of carnival, which is crucial for our understanding of memes.

Carnival in Bakhtin's analysis transcends an event rooted in time and space and is rather explored through its power dynamics, philosophical grounding, and expressions in both everyday life and arts of many sorts (in Bakhtin's scope, mainly literature). It becomes a liminal space where status loses its political power temporarily. Memes can be likened to carnival in the sense that within the online space they are revealed and free to interact with to all. It is precisely through Bakhtin's broad theoretical understanding of folk humour that we can theorize the meme culture of today, as it has multifaceted similarities with its medieval

predecessor. If memes can be likened to the carnival itself, the meme admins, the creators of this virtual liminal space are the clowns. As Bakhtin points out, the clown is a mirror to society, one that uses performance and masks to strip society of its status and reveals the grotesque body of life (Bakhtin 1984). Whilst the question of meme admin identity is a complicated one, based on the research of this thesis we can claim that most meme admins perform under a pseudonym, a persona. This persona is formed through their profile picture, biography, interactions within comments and, of course, their work. Within the scope of Rabelais, laughter is described as *''ambivalent, gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding''* (Bakhtin 1984), shaped according to a pattern of play. As will be shown in further chapters of this thesis, modern memes on the Slovak online scene evoke the very same ambivalent laughter, as they often mock, degrade or ridicule everyday human experiences. The heart of Bakhtinesque laughter is housed in grotesque realism (which after the transition into romantic period shifts its ideals and loses many key components of the former years). As mentioned before, this thesis is grounded in the pre-romantic ideas, hence the foundational grotesque body will be the focus here.

What is the grotesque body exactly? It is an essential inversion of societal norms, which seeks to celebrate all that is considered shameful and vulgar. It is a transgression of boundaries between the self and the other, challenging the fixed categorisation of society[3]. It does so by using flippant grammar and disobeying the aesthetics of the beautiful and sublime. It turns terror comical, life to death and vice versa (Bakhtin 1984). As such, degradation liberates. Societal expectations outside the carnival no longer hold power within, freeing the collective body to exist without shame. This bodily acceptance is crucial for our understanding of memes. Much like the grotesque body, memes use aversive aesthetics and incorrect grammar to detach their meaning from the rules of proper society. It is a vulnerable, yet socially subversive body.

1.3.   Gramsci's concept of hegemony

Whilst Gramsci's work, especially his prison notebooks, contain plethora of theoretical insights, the main concept relevant for this thesis is his articulation of hegemony. The basic understanding of the concept sheds light on the position of memes in the question of legitimacy and influence within the Slovak political arena. Explicitly conceptualised for the

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[3] In this sense Bakhtin and Mouffe share the same disdain for dichotomies and much prefer a pluralistic or fluid approach.

first time in 1924(Adamson 1980), Gramsci's hegemony managed to surpass classical Marxism, which was predominantly occupied with the question of economic structure and production. As Gramsci argued, using Italian historical references, there are two other components of hegemony that are crucial, and that is culture and education. The formulation of education can be described as a dialectical interaction between intellectuals and ordinary people, as a continuous collective action (Ruggieri 2021). When it comes to culture, Gramsci perceived it as a form of influence. While it helped understand how different classes came to power, it also allowed for a reimagination of the class struggle through culture and social relations, ideology and language. What is important to note is that hegemony was not positioned as a static form of power, but rather a fluid state which relied on continuous creation of meaning. Gramsci also pointed out that hegemony is not resolute and even in its influence, leaving space for counter-hegemonic movements and powers to arise (Adamson 1980). This positioning is in alignment with Mouffe's idea of agonistic pluralism and allows for certain constructivist freedoms within this thesis.

Such imagery of class influence distribution and continuation or growth allows this thesis to position memes in the space of counter-hegemonies, as a subversive expression of culture, and grants this expression of self and the community significance. Similarly, Gramsci's lens of education can be applied to the studied memes and its community (which includes meme admins and audiences alike), positioning the memes not only as expressions of self, but as sources of knowledge. The understanding of Gramsci's influence on leftist thought and theoretical articulation is rather limited in this thesis, but nevertheless offers the language and tools necessary to give post-girlboss memes a solid position in the Slovak political narrative.

2. Contextualisation

The feminist contextualisation of this thesis is grounded in the ideas of fourth wave feminism, a continuously intersectional approach to the gender inequalities of life, one which embraces modern and postmodern spaces for activization – such as social media(Jackson 2018). Whilst the analysis of found data showcases further reason why the discussed memes are believed to be well positioned as fourth wave feminist pieces of media, it is important to also acknowledge the ideas of post-feminism (Jain 2020). Post-feminism, as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra position it in their collection, is antithetical to intersectional feminist struggle, depicting feminist issues as no longer issues, profiting off of a consumer-led ideation

of comfort, beauty and success (Tasker and Negra 2007). Post-feminism poses a threat to feminist intersectionality and is often reproduced in media through portrayal of (white and middleclass) women whose youth is borderline fetishized, creating an image of a struggle free life of women. Instagram is no exception – in fact the term girlboss, as understood in this thesis, is predominantly post-feminist. The imagery of a girlboss culture is one of a carefree, performative existence validated mostly through material possessions and experiences, such as skincare, traveling, and food. It further portraits an idea of success in terms of professional and family life that is meant to seem effortless above all – a reality which is simply not obtainable by all (if any) women, especially in terms of race and socio-economic status.

But before we look at how post-girlboss memes decentralize the narrative of an effortless life, it is important to understand the context of fourth wave feminism in the age of social media, as well as defining girlhood in the context of this discussion. As the *girl* in *girlboss* suggests, recent years have seen a rise of reclamation of girlhood in the digital space(Keller et al. 2015). Today, we see terms and phrases such as *I'm just a girl*, *girl math*, *girl dinner*, *girlie pop* and so on floating around the internet as girls and women alike turn towards the aesthetics, symbolism and nostalgia surrounding girlhood for a sense of comfort, strength, and identity. This thesis believes that this can be seen as a direct response to post-feminism and capitalism, as women grow up to realise that their childhood was affected by societal gender norms and hijacked by consumer-led agenda(Keller 2015). What is more, they grow up to be adults in the society of recession, rising antagonisms and global pandemics. Their time and value are divided between numerous existential struggles, and the continuous pressure to perform as a woman, pressure from media, life partners, workplaces, or family. As a response, the return to passions and ideas of girlhood allows women to escape or counter these pressures. *Girl math*, for example, represents a rebellion against classist ideals of value. Money loses its power in the girl math dynamic, as the actor (a woman, a girl) understands the deep issued collapse of financial markets. Rising and unachievable rent prices, the gap between the rich and the poor widening, lead to money losing its appeal and meaning for young women. Transactions fluctuate in their importance; logic of math is surpassed (Scott 2023).

All of this, post-girlboss memes included, stands in agonism to the hegemonical portrayal of girlhood in media, which often objectifies, sexualises, or fetishizes girlhood (Keller et al. 2015). It is no wonder the pursuit of self-expression and self-identification of

girlhood witnesses a constant growth within the digital sphere.[4] However, as Sue Jackson points out in her essay on young feminists, feminism and digital media, not all women who interact and participate in the feminist narrative do so within the conscious self-identification of feminism (Jackson 2018).

Another important aspect of this thesis relies on the conjunction of feminism and pop culture, specifically the critique of neoliberal feminism and its representation of the feminist struggle. One of the best examples, and one with implications on the memes studied further in this thesis, is the Barbie movie franchise. As an effort to revive its brand in the early 2000s, Mattel decided to create a series of DVD-only Barbie movies, that set to retell the classical fairytales from the perspective of the blonde heroine. What was interesting about the concept of these movies was the creation of barbie as a modern individual as well as the protagonist of each story. Barbie represents all – the storyteller, as well as the (sentient) actress portraying iconic roles, such as Rapunzel, Thumbelina, or a gender-swapped Musketeer. Within the DVDs one found not only the movie, but also staged '*behind the scenes'* montages, where we could see the actors' outtakes, mistakes and free time activities on set. In some movies, we see Barbie reading the fairytale story, and then transitioning to seeing her portrayal of the story. Apart from this novel positioning of Barbie, all of these movies share one major similarity. They perform as pedagogy of post-feminism (Vered and Maizonniaux 2017). Within Barbie's stories, girl power is presented as a struggle of personal growth and hard work, which always leads to success. She is the centre of the story, and rather than her romantic relationship, it is the female friendships and self-identification that take central focus. Femininity is presented (not only) as bodily property. Barbie, and any of the other female *actors*, appear in feminine clothing, graceful, even if clumsy, and performing emancipation in the utmost feminine way. for example, when Barbie plays the role of a musketeer in the gender swapped retelling of the Three Musketeers, she and the other members only ever fight using predominantly feminine 'weapons' such as ribbons or fans (Vered and Maizonniaux 2017). Barbie shifts the sexual economy of a girl/woman from objectification to subjectification. The male gaze is utterly internalised in her role. This rebrand of Mattel's Barbie was and remains extremely successful, and harnesses support to this day. In fact, many of its imageries and aesthetics are present in the post-girlboss memes studied in this thesis.

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[4] An important note here is that this thesis does not differentiate between offline and online feminist activism in terms of importance or value. As of today, the digital space harnesses the same if not more severe implications on the offline world as any offline action.

However neoliberal feminism extends to real life celebrities and pop culture as well. In her 2015 case study, Keller analyses the public life of Tavi Gevinson, the founder of the *Rookie* magazine. She represents the ideal self-actualized neoliberal subject. As a white, privileged actor, she pursuits feminism in an individualistic way, one that values entrepreneurship and individualism, becoming a brand. While the author makes arguments that perhaps one can combine the neoliberal perception whilst still pursuing the communal struggle (Keller 2015), Trier-Bieniek's collection on Feminism and pop culture clearly shows there is little to no progress made in such manner. In the second article of her collection, *Girls, Grrrls, Girls: Lena Dunham, Girls, and the Contradictions of Fourth Wave Feminism,* author April Kalogeropoulos Householder examines the contradictions of fourth wave feminism as portrayed in Lena Dunham's popular television show, Girls. Householder argues that fourth-wave feminism does not mean that feminism has evolved into a higher or better version, but rather that its ambivalent relationship with popular culture is more normalized today (Householder 2015). Householder examines the representation of feminism in *Girls* and argues that the show is not interested in challenging traditional gender roles, but rather in exploring them and finding ways to make them more palatable. Despite its attempt to explore progressive gender roles and stereotypes, it ultimately fails to challenge the status quo. The result is that traditional gender roles are reinforced and perpetuated, and any potential for progress towards a more egalitarian society is stymied (Householder 2015). This is both a problem for the characters in the narrative and for society as a whole, as it leaves us without the possibility of meaningful progress in creating a more equitable world. She further argues that while the show is a meta representation of the struggle, and hence its normalization of gender roles and stereotypes reflects the current situation, in doing so without nuanced acknowledgement it can be seen as normalizing such stereotypes.

We know from Kellers and Ringrose's interviews with young girls on the subject of celebrity feminism, that the façade of performative feminism is rather transparent. The interviewed young girls were able to identify the use of feminism as part of a celebrity brand, likening it to fashion. This surface level feminist self-branding is seen as part of the economy of a celebrity and, once again, a constant reminder or privilege – for it is not of existential matter for these personas, merely a means to draw in a bigger audience, grow profit and save one's public image (Keller and Ringrose 2015).

All of these examples are to show that the relationship between feminism and popular culture is a contested one. Whilst there are no doubt good intentions hidden behind many of these public celebrity efforts, the nature of neoliberalism overshadows these in favour of consumerism and growth. Memes, whilst channelling popular culture, can therefore play a critical role in reclaiming the hidden intentions, or, if nothing else, hijacking the expressions and use their aesthetic to build a relevant commentary on post-feminism.

As this thesis focuses on Slovak post-girlboss memes, it is important to understand the basic political landscape of Slovakia. The political nature of Slovakia is heavily influenced by its origin in the last stretch of the 20th century. Marked by both the Velvet revolution and the Velvet divorce, Slovak democracy is a young one, merely entering her figurative thirties. The democratization process and formation of civic society is therefore still to this day affected by the population that saw its beginnings.

We cannot discuss the early democratic transition without discussing the role of Vladimír Mečiar in setting the tone for the next generations of politicians and voters alike. Mečiar, and his party, HZDS were in power almost uninterrupted from 1990 until 1998 (Spáč 2012). During this time, Mečiar harnessed a large following as well as dedicated critics, as his actions as the prime minister are often described as authoritarian, manipulative and populistic. As the author of this thesis writes in their bachelor thesis,

''The HZDS lead government was progressively drifting away from liberal democracy and their problematic manner of governance caused one of the greatest political and social divisions Slovakia had ever seen. In its beginnings HZDS presented itself as the opposing power to political actors who failed to oversee the transition from socialist-realism to democracy and capitalism and their focus was on those who lost out in the post-1989 economic transformation, people from rural areas with strong support among older voters and voters with less education as well as areas with higher proportions of Catholics. ... The problematic actions of the Mečiar government led to serious polarization on the political scene in the 1990s. ... The position of the HZDS was so predominant that the positions of all the other parties in the system were defined by their relationship to the Movement, or rather its chairman. Ideological considerations were secondary. It was this tension that produced dissatisfaction and then frustration among large segments of the public''(Králiková 2021)

Whilst in context of Mouffe's theories, such antagonism is harmful to democracy, its people and institutions, the one positive takeaway Slovak civic society gained from

Mečiarism is their ability to mobilize, and establish numerous non-governmental institutions, media and movements (Kusá 2010). Despite this activization, the perception of voting *against* rather than *in favour* of a candidate, following a strong party leader and not challenging the rude uncooperative communication with one's opponent remained and can be seen repeating over several electoral cycles, up to today. Smer, and its leading figure Róbert Fico saw major political protests calling for their removal from the parliament, with its peak in 2016, OĽANO and Igor Matovič stirred similar, even if more muted polarization during their term, exaggerated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The position of women in the process of Slovak democratization was marginal, and few steps were taken to actively engage more women in the political participation on a party level. Some assign the rise of Iveta Radičová to a slight shift in the dynamic, as she was the first female presidential candidate to get close to being elected (Bútorová 2009). And, of course, with the 2019 presidential elections, Zuzana Čaputová did in fact break that glass ceiling and became the first female president of Slovakia. However, as Bútorová points out, the prevalence of patriarchal values and lack of institutional support of women in politics create few opportunities for women in politics(Bútorová 2009).

3. Methodology
3.1. Introduction

For the analysis of Instagram meme posts that amalgamate textual and visual data a specific methodology had to be chosen. For the reasons of an intricate dynamic between text and image found in these posts, Visual Grounded Theory Methodology (referred to as 'VTGM' further on), a nuanced adaptation of Grounded theory methodology was applied, alongside elements of cultural analysis which, as will be shown shortly, is present in all steps of the analysis and data collection.

3.2. Visual Grounded Theory Methodology (VGTM)

First, let us look at VTGM. Its roots lie in grounded theory, generally attributed to Glasser and Strauss, who saw the need for a procedural approach to generating new theories to understand and increase knowledge, whilst acknowledging the presence of the scientist and their social, cultural, and professional influence on the theory (Heath and Cowley 2004). As such, grounded theory methodology is centrally inductive, whereas deduction and verification occur at the end of the process and only after being defined by the data collected itself.

Working its way from the data back, Glasser and Strauss later disagreed about the nuances of said methodology. Along with Corbin, Strauss opted for a more analytical approach to initial open coding, followed by a formation of clustering categories based on the paradigm model, as well as detailed coding and theory description at the end. Glaser supports substantive coding that is heavily data dependent with a continuous cycle of comparisons during coding. Only at the end of this process (presumably at the point of data saturation) does glasserian grounded theory methodology form a theoretical core and a relatively flexible theory rather than a fully actualized straussian theory (Konecki 2011). With the arrival of the visual turn as well as the digital turn later on, several scholars aimed to modify existing grounded theory approaches to accommodate new formats of data (or, in the case of images, data that has before been disregarded as complimentary) (Konecki 2011). While visual data was gradually becoming present in grounded theory methodology, none of these efforts acknowledged the need for a different approach to visual data in a theorized manner. In 2011 Konecki published an article titled 'Visual Grounded Theory: A Methodological Outline and Examples from Empirical Work' in which he introduced the reasoning behind VTGM, new concepts and clear methodology to follow when analysing visual data.

3.3. Konecki's new concepts – reconstructing layers of meaning

The key innovative concept of Konecki is the notion of multislice imagining, a methodological model for analysing visual data within grounded theory framework which acknowledges the layered nature of visual data. The essence of multislice imagining lies in its acknowledgment that visual data are multi-layered, requiring a comprehensive analysis of all layers to fully conceptualize visual processes. This concept aligns with the broader qualitative goal of reconstructing multilayered phenomena in social theory, as advocated by Glasser and Strauss. The concept unfolds in four key stages, each of which emphasises a different facet of the visual process. The foremost layer is the act of creating pictures and images, or the analysis of context of creation. Within this layer one seeks to understand the circumstances of visual content creation. Such consideration allows the researcher to be immersed in the contextual nuances that shape the data. Second layer focuses on communication of the given visual data and elements of participation involved in demonstrating the data. It is through this layer that the researcher analyses the interactive nature of both the producers and consumers and seeks to understand the dynamic of narrative co-creation. With the third layer one finally analyses the visual product itself, with emphasis on its stylistic structure. Both content and

style elements contribute to the multi-layered nature of visual communication. Lastly, the reception of the visual product and aspects of representation are considered. This stage explores the visual dimensions involved in presenting or representing a certain subject. In contrast to situational analysis, multislice imagining goes beyond mere description, aiming to adjust the researcher's mindset and connect specific features of events with generic processes for theoretical elaboration. It is viewed as a grammar of narratives, framing observed cases during an investigation without being tethered to external forces, social laws, or patterns of domination (Konecki 2011).

3.4. VTGM step by step

While Konecki introduced the concept of VTGM, this thesis relies on a slightly refined methodological process of VTGM as introduced my Mey and Dietrich in their 2017 article 'Text to Image: Shaping a Visual Grounded theory Methodology', which goes as followed:

A. Contextualization: In most cases a research topic is chosen because of prior interest of the researcher in given field and so the first step of the analysis should be a decision on how and if information about the topic should be collected. The applications of potential external information in the analysis should be considered at this stage.

B. Description/Inventory: An active, interpretative stage of the analysis, during which an inventory of *what is shown* is created. Mey and Dietrich suggest following a Breckenrian-Bohnsack approach which locates the fore-, middle- and background elements separately.

C.   Segmentation: Maintaining fidelity to Konecki's foundational ideas, this stage interprets the sequenced elements found during the description phase. Once again, combining Breckners and Bohnsack's approach leads to a compositionally organized analysis of data.

D. Memo writing and coding: Perhaps the most crucial step of VTGM is the segmentative interpretation of elements and its implications on the whole image through which codes emerge. Deviating from Konecki's emphasis on text-based interpretation, Mey and Dietrich argue that it is possible to interpret the image directly rather than interpret based on a textual description of the image. It is suggested to use the so-called *WH* questions to make sure that one's analysis does not stray too far from the original data.

E. Interpretation and integration: at this point researchers' decision on the importance of contextual data in the process is necessary. While for documentary style VTGM studies minimum knowledge is required, some analyses, such as the one of this theses, require heavy use of contextual clues found outside the image itself. However, with external

knowledge entering the analysis a detailed description of the interpretation must be included to assure intersubjective traceability. This can be done through conceptual memos, created during all times.

F. Formation of categories: The essence of VGTM lies in the formation of categories, merging semantic meaning with the image's formal constitution. This stage synthesizes Konecki's principles with added nuances introduced by Mey and Dietrich. It is advised to interact with the memos created during the process when creating and explaining the chosen categories.

G. Expansion of the material: Assuring that saturation point has been reached by theoretical sampling of additional material.

H. Integration: The importance of understanding the relationship between textual and visual elements of the image take place in the integration step, as their respective categories might either deviate from each other or be interlinked (Mey and Dietrich 2017).

3.5.   VTGM in practice: Instagram posts analysis

The unique nature of Instagram posts, where visuals and text amalgamate on several levels, calls for a nuanced approach even when applying VTGM. During the process of data collection and analysis these four factors were considered.

A. Unique Characteristics of Instagram Posts: Instagram, as a platform, introduces unique characteristics that shape the analysis. The interplay of text and visuals in posts and captions becomes a focal point, demanding a methodological scrutiny to capture the synergies and tensions between these components, as text appears in both the description of the posts and can be included in the posts themselves either as the focal point or as a complimentary element.

B. Visual Language in the Digital Sphere: Cultural analysis within VGTM extends to decoding the visual language specific to the digital sphere. This involves deciphering how digital aesthetics, emojis, and visual compositions contribute to the overall meaning-making process within Instagram posts.

C. Reflexivity in Digital Ethnography: As researchers engage in the digital ethnography of Instagram posts, reflexivity takes centre stage. Acknowledging the digital context, the dynamics of online communities, and the impact of algorithms becomes integral to a culturally informed interpretation (Halaweh 2018). Within this context number of likes,

interaction in the comments and overall relevance of the accounts (based on their following, profile bio and activity) was partially considered in this research.

D. Interdisciplinary Insights: The application of VGTM to Instagram posts transcends disciplinary boundaries. Insights from cultural studies, digital anthropology, and visual communication studies converge to provide a holistic understanding of the cultural dynamics embedded in these digital artifacts (Chen et al. 2023).

3.6. Cultural analysis within the VTGM process

Cultural analysis was an inherent and conscious part of the research process, as the data chosen for this thesis as well as the research question demand a cultural sensitivity. In the initial stage of contextualization, cultural analysis plays a pivotal role. Researchers decide whether and how to incorporate context information, considering its role as an indicator of image formation or as a source of insights into producers and publication locations. Creating a description or inventory involves an active interpretation of visual space. Cultural semiotics comes into play, guiding the analysis not merely towards visible elements but also towards the deeper layers of cultural meanings encapsulated in the visuals and without such approach many hinted meanings behind the data would remain unseen (Ruggieri 2021). While such semiotic approach can produce merely speculations without confirmation of intent from the creator, they are still crucial to the interpretative process and bring value to the research. Interpretation in VGTM becomes a tapestry where cultural discourses are interwoven with visual meanings. The researcher must navigate the cultural landscape, discerning connections, connotations, and relationships between visual elements and broader socio-cultural narratives in order to analyse data chosen for their research. Furthermore, formation of categories, a pivotal stage, considers not only semantic meaning but also the formal constitution of the image within its cultural context. This ensures that categories resonate not only with visual elements but also with the socio-cultural fabric in which they are embedded (Ruggieri 2021). During this research cultural insights were also present when reaching saturation point through theoretical sampling, as additional data collection was guided by the understanding of cultural dimensions at play in the digital meme culture. Cultural analysis also extends to dialogues within the Instagram platform and their resonance beyond. Understanding how visual narratives present in digital spaces contribute to or challenge broader cultural discourses in both the digital and offline realm enriches the analysis (Halaweh 2018).

3.7. Comparisons and limitations

While VGTM presents a robust framework for analysing visual data, it is imperative to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in its application to the study of Instagram meme posts which were considered before opting for using VTGM. Despite its adaptation to visual data, VTGM retains a text-heavy reliance during its interpretation phase, which can be counter productive to the analysis of memes, with deeply imbedded meanings. Furthermore, a researcher must create a detailed memo trail of their interpretative process as a high level of subjectivity is at play in one's interpretation and categorization. Another difficulty that arose during this research was simply the fast-paced nature of the digital spaces and memes as such, which would often lead to continuous and unstoppable insurgence of new themes and formats produced over a short period of time.

Despite all of these limitations VTGM has been favoured over other methods such as iconography, semiotics or content analysis. While cultural semiotics offer valuable insights into the symbolic meanings of visual elements, VGTM goes beyond mere speculation. It provides a systematic and step-by-step approach that integrates both semiotic interpretations and concrete data, ensuring a more grounded and robust analysis. Content analysis, as a rather quantitative approach, would fall short when dealing with the complexity of memes. VGTM's qualitative and inductive nature allows for a nuanced exploration of the layered meanings in visual content instead. While iconography would work well to decode symbols and visual elements in isolation, it lacks the holistic understanding of memes that multislice imagining as well as interpretative tools allow in VTGM. Unlike some methodologies that might treat visuals in isolation, VGTM allows for the recognition of the interconnectedness of visuals with cultural contexts, online communities, and digital communication dynamics.

4. Research and data analysis

A total of 90 memes spread over three accounts were analysed using the VTGM methodology (see attachment). Taking into account the constant growth of activity on these accounts, the time period from which memes were collected was limited to those posted in the year 2022 and the first half of 2023. When a given account was chosen as a post-girlboss meme account, all of its 2022 memes were taken into account and memes from 2023 were chosen in the second round of research to reach data saturation. At the end of the collection, it was clear that several topical categories appeared which could house all of the collected memes. In the first section of data analysis, this chapter will look at each of these categories, then on their relationship with one another. Second part of the analysis chapter will focus on

the image of a meme admin created through the analysis of their work. Third section will then look at the presupposed image of the audience- the consumers of the content. Last section of the analysis will be dedicated to language and form of the analysed content.

Before the data analysis is presented, an exemplary post should be shown to present the VTGM methodology in practice. This meme comes from the account @certifikovanagirlbosska, and was posted on 18th of March in 2022 (figure 1). When analysing the meme, first the meme receives a code for easier catalogisation, and the link to the original post is noted. This meme is CGB2. Date of posting, number of slides as well as the description of the post are written down. The description of this meme states ''it never ends''. Then the image is analysed in six steps. The visible data is described in foreground, middle ground, and background, and then each get its own contextual analysis. In the foreground of this meme, we see a white Slovak text on a black background, which roughly translates to *''nothing scares me more than the fact that in a month or two I will cringe at the thought of my current self''*. Middle ground shows a male presenting portrait of a person with mixed complexion, strong eyebrows and deep blue hair in a pink hoodie looking off into the distance. Based on google reverse image searching the man was identified as an Instagram user @christianwalk1r, whose hair has been edited from original black in his Instagram story to vibrant blue. Christian is an online influencer and a conservative political commentator. After his incident at a coffee chain Starbucks with the singer Kehlani his images have been used in memes of the liberal online users, usually in a Starbucks setting. Often, his hair is edited to be blue because a popular perception of liberals promoted on the internet that came about after a TikTok comment from 2021 that stated *''of course you have blue hair and pronouns''* went viral on Twitter and continued to exist as a meme element connecting liberal individuals with blue hair. The background shows an indoor setting with natural sunlight coming through a window reflecting on the beige walls. The second part of the analysis consists of writing memos about the possible interpretation, and in the case of this thesis space for three categories was created – primary, secondary, and tertiary, to be able to see any overlap and intersection of categories. Last but not least the needs of this thesis call for a section noting down any popular culture references. In the case of this meme, we see the use of internet slang (cringe) and references to two meme artifacts (Christian Walker, blue haired liberal). Categories and final interpretation can change throughout the entire process of data collection. In this case the final interpretation takes into account the fact that other posts from this account are often critical and mocking towards liberals, so the connection can be made

here that the choice to use Christian Walker with blue hair is to signify how Christian Walker often changes his stance on political issues, as well as an implication that liberals are cringeworthy, therefore the image fits the text in the foreground perfectly to represent changing ones personality every two months. In the case of the author, we see that their political stance, which is generally left-leaning does not change throughout a year of their content, so the cringe changes that they refer to here are most likely of personal nature, rather than political.

Figure 1. Instagram post by @certifikovanagirlbosska, 18.03.2022,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CbPv7UBAz5W/?img_index=1

4.1.   Content analysis: Pop cultural references

When it comes to referencing pop culture in post-grlboss memes, it is almost always mentioned and used in tandem with a commentary on a certain topic – popular culture itself is not the centre of the content, but rather a vessel for meaning. Meme admins are utilizing the characteristics and visuals of a piece of popular culture to express their message more eloquently. What are the main popular culture references then? To further diversify, they have been categorized as such; children's media, computer games, Celebrities and Barbie (whilst barbie can be considered a subgenre of children's cartoons and media, the overwhelming use of its symbols prompted a creation of its own category).

4.1.1. Childrens media

There are several children- focused pieces of media referenced in the studied memes. Big section of these media are children's cartoons, specifically Spongebob, The amazing World of

Gumball and The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron, Boy Genius. All three of these cartoons begun their release in the early 2000s or 2010s (Spongebob in 1999 , Gumball in 2011 and Jimmy Neutron in 2002, respectively). What is important to note here is that the children focused network that carried these shows appeared on the Slovak market as Fox Kids (launched in 2001), later known as Jetix (2005) and finally as the Disney Channel (2009), making it one of the first international broadcasts of global children's content in Slovakia after the fall of communism. One can argue that that heightened the significance of these shows for Slovak children (who grew up to be Slovak meme admins). Spongebob, especially, can be singled out as one of the most successful shows in terms of staying relevant, as it saw an uprise in popularity during the 2014 Tumblr era, and consecutively as one of the favourite meme source (such as Spongegar[5], which appeared for the first time in 2014, Mocking Spongebob [6]in 2017 or suicidal Squidward [7]from 2010 popularized by an online creator creepypasta). Interestingly, all analysed memes that referenced SpongeBob were, in theme, concerned with mental health.

Another category of children's media are animated movies, such as The Incredibles and the Despicable Me franchise. Here once again we can see a connection between a certain element of children's media being popularized during the 2010s, such as the minions from Despicable me, and the source material becoming a popular prop in meme creation. A meme referencing minions appeared in the dataset, coming from @certifikovanagirlbosska once again. This post, using the image of modified Kevin, one of the title minions from the franchise, talks about internalized homophobia in men, and how it is often these very men that portray signs of being quote on quote *fruity* (slang for queer). Mr. Incredible, the patriarchal head of the family in the The Incredibles franchise has too become a popular meme template, with his headshot being formatted to go from extremely confident and cheerful to depressed and non-responsive. Within the meme that was studied in this thesis, Mr. Incredible was in fact used in these two versions in a slideshow, to talk about mental health and the dichotomy of a depressive and manic episode (see CODE in the attachement).

Honourable mentions of the children's media category are Hulk, a cartoon character turned movie star with the Avengers franchise, as well as Sanrio characters, such as Hello Kitty, Kuromi or My Melody.

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[5] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spongegar-primitive-sponge-caveman-spongebob
[6] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/mocking-spongebob
[7] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/squidwards-suicide

4.1.2. Computer games

Two computer games were referenced within the data pool, Grand Theft Auto and Five Nights At Freddys. These games were not only extremely popular at the time of their release but gathered a large online following and their visual values started to be reproduced within online content.

Grand Theft Auto, GTA for short, is a popular series of games (with more than dozen different versions, ranging from GTA, GTA San Andreas, GTA London, GTA Vice City, and very anticipated GTA VI which has not been released yet). The premise of the game, as the title suggests, is to steal vehicles, avoid law enforcement and enjoy the life of a morally grey person. There are many side quests within the game, which contributed to the creation of GTA lore. One character in particular, became a viral meme persona. One of the most interesting uses of GTA in the analysed memes comes in a form of a series of memes, which reference the aforementioned viral character in a total of 14 memes (two slideshows, to be exact, one published in March CGB17, and one in April- CGB40).

Five Nights At Freddys, or FNAF, for short, is a horror game that reached its peak popularity in 2014?. Last year (2023), a movie inspired by the game was released, further proving that there is heightened interest in popular artifacts of the 2010s. One meme (figure 2) was detected using FNAF as a visual reference to create a political satire post. The meme provocatively boldly claims that voters of the Slovak right-wing neofascist political party ĽSNS are racist but also have an underlying race play sexual kink. The use of FNAF imagery here is rather easy to decode. The post expresses disdain and shock, horror, even, over the supposed hypocritical nature of right wing Slovak voters. As a game built on jump scares whose sole purpose is to scare its player, it can be said that the author likens the fear and terror to the realization of the possible race play kink in the targeted voters. In the visual we see one of the characters from FNAF, the fox, moving frantically as if in panic or trying to get out of its own body, until its face comes close to the foreground and freezes, and we see its eyes being wide open as in shock.

Figure 2. Instagram post by @certifikovanagirlbosska, 24.03.2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CbfMN-3Ay-a/?img_index=1

4.1.3. Celebrities

This category consists of any mentions of popular real-life people, who were explicitly referenced in the imagery of the memes, within our dataset often linked to political satire. An extremely sophisticated example is a 2023 meme by @marikinevyznania, combining the singers from 2023 Eurovision with the outcomes of the Slovak parliamentary elections of the same year. To understand this meme, one must be well versed in the lore of Eurovision. SMER-SD, the party that has won the elections is represented by the Swedish winner of 2023 Eurovision, Loreen. Progresívne Slovensko (PS for short), a progressive party of Slovakia, is represented by her runner up and fan favourite, Finnish Käärijä. The comparison does not end at the level of coming in at first and second place. Loreen has been praised for her majestic voice and experience, whilst Käärijä has become a popular contestant due to their unusual experimental sound with their song Cha Cha Cha, likening PS to a fresh new approach to governance (figure 3). Other references include Taylor Swift, Michael Cera, actors from the TV series Peaky blinders and Robbie Williams.
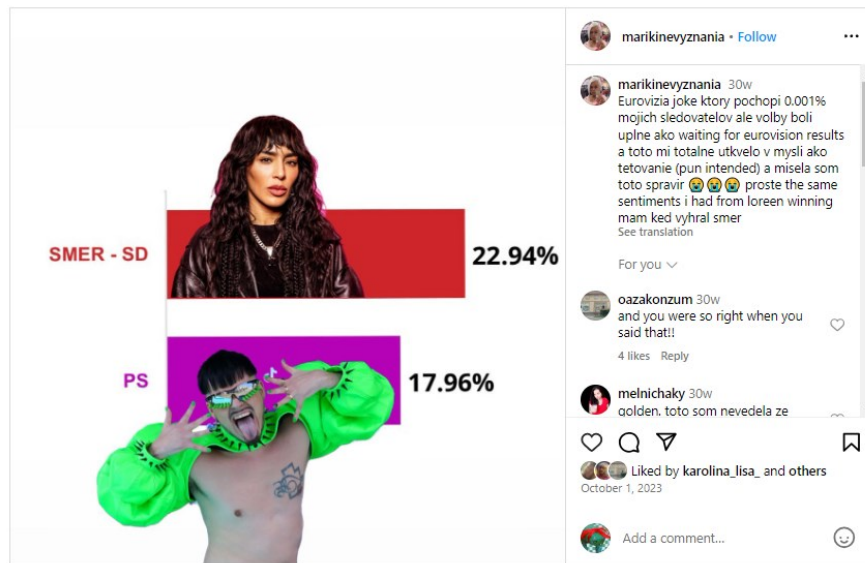
Figure 3. Instagram post by @marikinevyznania, 1.10.2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx2WTHINFGs/

4.1.4. Barbie

Last but not least is the Barbie referencing in collected memes. It is interesting to point out that this study was conducted before the release of the 2023 movie Barbie, and yet we can see Barbie being referenced often. As addressed in the contextualisation chapter, Barbie movies released on DVDs in the early and mid-2000s represent a certain post-feminist sensitivity and subjectification. It is therefore interesting to see the post-girlboss memes taking the very same content and using it to disrupt the image and performance of such sensitivity. Most prominently seen in the works of @cicky_mitski, Barbie appears in several memes throughout 2022 and 2023, especially when talking about explicit sexual experiences. This goes against the philosophy of the Barbie movies, as they stray away from using objectification of the body in a sexual way and instead opt for subjectification through behaviour, clothing and mindset. Other uses of Barbie in @cicky_mitski's work include posts about mental health, and one excellent example portrays Slovak queerphobia by using a scene from the 2010 Barbie movie *A Fashion Fairytale* to portray the need to *'go back into the closet'*, meaning hide one's queerness, when coming to Slovakia (figure 4). We later see them post about their bisexuality whilst using the character of Bibble from the *Barbie Fairytopia* series, confirming their queerness.
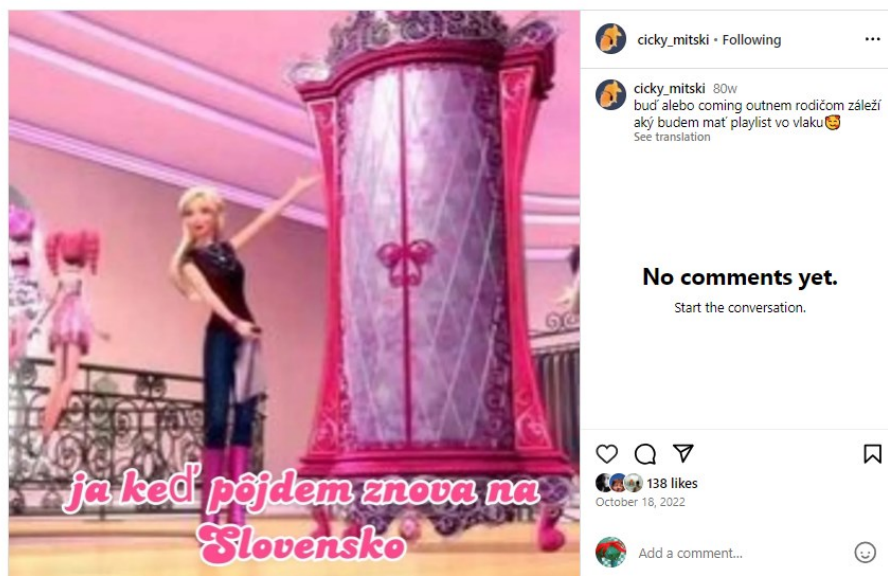
Figure 4. Instagram post by @cicky_mitski, 18.10.2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj2VG4Etj4y/

Three out of four major categories of pop culture references are closely tied to childhood and teenagerhood, which corresponds with the theoretical approach mentioned earlier in the thesis. The act of reclaiming these symbols of childhood to express oneself (and their often-mature thoughts) creates a nostalgic link, awakens a memory for the consumers and *lightens* the delivery of one's message.

4.2. Content analysis: Online culture references

As can be seen in the analysis of the pop culture references, the online culture artefacts often intersect with online culture references. However, there are a few unique traits of referencing online culture that should be addressed. What is understood as online culture here are trends, meme templates that are modified and reproduced further, online personas or platforms.

4.2.1. Online language

Internet and its culture of course adopt its own language over time. In the studied memes we can not only see the use of language popularized on the internet, but also a strong cross-platform awareness and meme literacy. Phrases such as woke, based, cringe, hate culture, sigma male, finance bro or gatekeeping are mentioned. This section offers an explanation of some of the most significant ones and their online origin.

Finance bro and sigma male are two terms that we see used often, especially when male figures appear in the content. *Finance bro* represents a stereotype of a male who works

in finance, very often also presented as working in consulting or banking. There are visual aspects assigned to such male actor; suit and tie, or in a more casual setting a shirt and a sports vest. The term finance bro describes a male actor who is fully invested in the financial market and is derogatory in the sense that such male is believed to support capitalism and its constant need for growth, for they benefit from such growth on a personal level. When the studied meme admins engaged with the term finance bro, it was always in a satirical conversation, one that also carried gendered aspects, such as having interactions with men that are only capable of conversing about finances and women, or men who showcase performative feminism to attract women.

Terms as woke, gatekeep, or hate culture, refer to certain behaviours online. Being woke turned from its original meaning of being awake, e.g. aware of the global issues to a derogatory term describing those who are only performative when it comes to engagement with mentioned issues. Gatekeeping usually refers to the act of not sharing the source of something we deem valuable, be it a fashion brand, musical artist, which we wish to keep for ourselves, or we wish for it to not be popularized. It is then interesting to see @certifikovanagirlbosska make a post about 'men gatekeeping politics' (a valid political critique), to be able to hold hands freely (a satirical homoerotic claim) (figure 5).
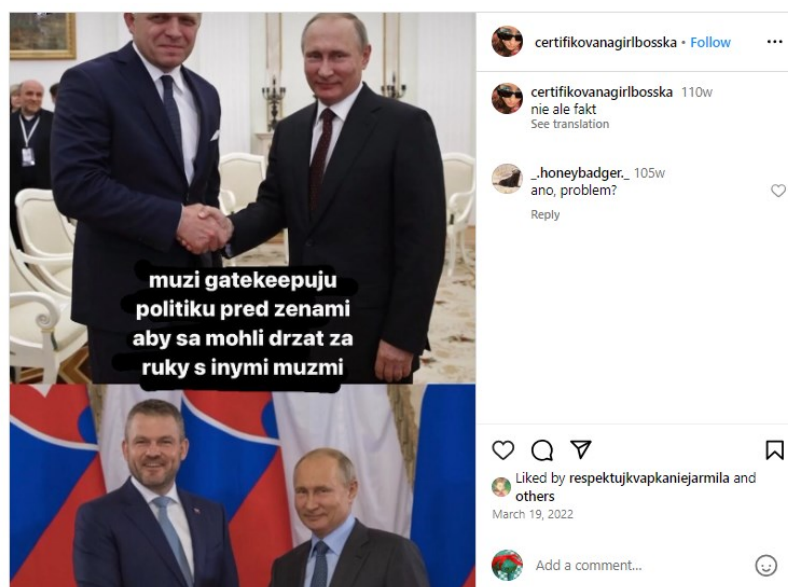

Figure 5. Instagram post by @certifikovanagirlboska, 19.03.2022,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CbSP1FbgKDK/?img_index=1

4.2.2. Meme templates

As one of the main characteristics of memes is their ability to reproduce and spread thought-out the online spaces with their significant characteristics being recognized as the continuation of the original meme trend, they are easy to spot. Some of the first popularized meme templates involved simple 2D figures with emphasized facial expressions or physical actions (Börzsei 2013) , and these we can also see in the studied dataset of Slovak post-girlboss memes. These templates are not used often, which can be a sign of them 'coming out of style' and being considered old-fashioned as these meme templates were one of the first ones to be popularized in the early 2010s. Some of their newer variations can be seen used in @cicky_mitskis works, such as their post on the dichotomy of being in a vulnerable position (due to sickness) in which two images are presented. One, using the modernized 2D figures expresses a positive feeling of publicly showcasing that one is sick and presenting as vulnerable and in need of care, whilst the second post (also using the modernized formatting of the figures), expresses the discomfort of actually being vulnerable and in need of help.

4.2.3. Everything – core and aesthetics

The rise and popularization of cores and aesthetics is one worthy of its own thesis, but for the sake of our research what is important to know is that as we see the introduction of new trends, whether in fashion, lifestyle or otherwise constantly growing and going through an ever speeding cycle, the internet started to adopt a language and a philosophical approach to the performative ways of life, creating a tool of extreme self-identification. As an example, *cottagecore* refers to a rural lifestyle, medieval inspired fashion, soft undetectable make up, the idealization of living in remote places, farming, sustainable cooking, and has its own visual significators, such as countryside flora, soft earthy colours, mushrooms and so on. People who participate or self-identify as performing in a cottagecore way, do not of course always live in the same way as they present, but this is not the goal of the -cores. They act as a form of escapism from capitalistic pressures of society, as a performance of a life that could have been, had the need to participate in a global economy not existed. Very popular amongst the studied memes are forms of princesscore or coquettecore, both aesthetics that rely on strong visual elements, such as frills, bows, the colours pink, white and occasionally red. Involvement of Barbie-coded elements is also present. Once again, princesscore presents and escape from reality and offers a performative alternative where one lives as a princess – note that a princess is not made to work, pay rent, and so on. The current believe is that such cores and aesthetics are a way for (mostly) young people to escape or subvert the pressure of living under late capitalism.

4.2.4. Cross-platform awareness

We can see a post showcasing an *anti-reel missile* (CGB13.2, see attachment) around the time when Instagram introduced *reels*, short videos, and even added a separate button in the navigation for users for them. Reels often receive backlash from meme creators and young users in general for two reasons. Firstly, reels have only appeared after the rapid rise of popularity of TikTok, a platform solely dedicated to short-form videos. Instagram received backlash for copying the style and format of TikTok, as users already enjoyed such content on a different platform. Secondly, a running joke on the internet is the slow reactiveness of reels to trends online, claiming that formats and topics that go viral on TikTok only start to appear on reels month or so later. TikTok as such is also referenced in post-girlboss memes, either in regard to the platform as such, to its trends, or content. A post quoting a song that went viral on TikTok, titled Real Women Vote For Trump, can be found in the studied dataset(CGB8, see attachment).

4.3. Locality, urban and socio economic references

An interesting finding in the dataset was the spatiality and connection to physical spaces, most often ones that can be found in urban settings. Within Slovak context, where the differences between the rural and urban areas are still tangible, this shows a preference for the urban setting. This has implications on one's opportunities, educational, professional and social life. Today, we can still see political differences reflected in the regional divide, which leads one to believe that the affection towards the urban also hints at the political preferences of the meme admins who create these memes. Urban population is more likely to vote for progressive parties, less likely to be religious and more likely to have higher education. This section will then look at some of the mentions of locality and their meaning.

Lidl, a discount supermarket, has in recent years become a favourite of the younger generation, especially the one we can identify as gen Z. There might be few reasons for this, one of the obvious ones being recession and need to be savvy when shopping for groceries. The second could be the popularized concept of themed weeks that Lidl offers, where a week is dedicated either to a cuisine of a certain country, time period or others. As some reports suggest, Lidl is one of the supermarket chains that were able to capture the attention of the younger consumer by creating a brand identity that can sustainably grow with their audience. In 2020, Lidl released their own line of branded clothing (IKEA did so too, another fan favourite of gen Z), and to great success. Lidl was also one of the first supermarkets to utilize

TikTok to promote their brand and products in a style and tone catered for the young generation. For an interview with Marketingweek, the Head of Campaigns and Marketing for Lidl said *"We built the idea on a core customer truth: that our bakery is loved ... Then we celebrated it using a cult classic track and, together with our agencies, we worked directly with N-Trance using real customer comments."* when talking about their TikTok campaign Ode to bakery.[8] But Lidl is not the only place mentioned in the memes. Other stores, such as DrogerieMarkt (DM for short), Martinus (Slovak bookstore chain), IKEA.

While these suggest an urban setting for the meme admins, with some memes and their creators we can push the localization even further, as places such as Yeme (a Slovak food market), Ost Block (central bar and café), Kaviareň Vták (roastery and café), Onakô (store with custom recycled clothing) and Le Miam (French style café) were mentioned in a post titled 'my safe space' (MV8, see attachment). All of these are exclusive to the capital city, Bratislava.

Overall, the importance of mentioning physical places (and always in a positive sentiment) in their work can be connected to the need for physical third spaces, and the aforementioned safe spaces. Based on the selection it also suggests that most young meme admins have a strong need for aesthetic café spaces, are inclined towards local-made or local-owned products and stores, hinting at a sense of belonging and connection to Slovakia.

4.4. Mental health references

An overwhelming number of posts regarding mental health were of self-derogatory nature. Not only do these posts showcase a very high level of self-introspection, but they create a vibrant image of the mental wellbeing of the Slovak youth (especially that of girls and women). Overall, it is an image of the struggle with individualism and isolation, sexualization and objectification of women, exhaustion, and depression.

The portrayal of loneliness is three dimensional in the studied memes. Firstly, a lack of strong emotional support and healthy network leaves the self overwhelmed when met with affection. We see posts expressing how the author is not used to affection and kindness and therefore when met with such, becomes overwhelmed. We can recall the @cicky_mitski post mentioned earlier, on how being sick and weak is only desired as a performance of vulnerability, but once they are in a weak state and in need of help they feel disgust and

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[8] https://www.marketingweek.com/cut-through-with-creativity-on-tiktok/

discomfort. This sense of loneliness in terms of meaningful affection, created a nihilistic sentiment, as can be seen in this meme, which consists of two slides. One proclaiming 'and ive never felt more alone', whilst the second slide showcases dancing and a text that, in muted translation says, 'I do not care about anything anymore' (figure 6). We see this sort of dichotomy repeated in other posts too, such as one using the Mr. Incredible meme template (figure 7), one which goes as far as to contemplate suicidal thoughts.
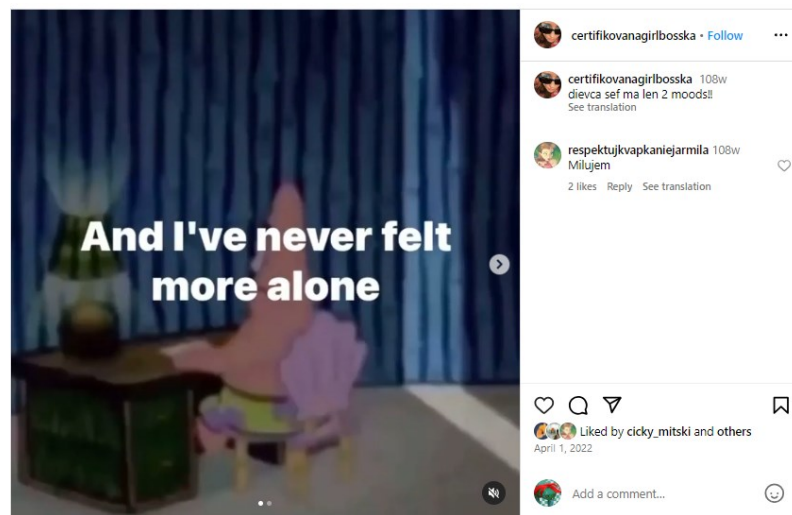

Figure 6. Instagram post by @certifikovanagirlbosska, 01.04.2022,
https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb0V9amN3Lc/?img_index=1

Figure 6. Instagram post by @certifikovanagirlbosska, 01.04.2022,
https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb0V9amN3Lc/?img_index=2

Secondly, the constant frustration with behaviour of others towards the self in terms of romantic relationships creates disdain for such relationships and is often expressed in the

studied memes. Overwhelming number of memes refer to the problematic behaviour of men towards women and the frustrations this produces in the heteronormative romantic relationships that could be formed between them. There are multiple critiques expressed in the memes. One of them is the lack of awareness and unwillingness of men to listen to the experiences of girls and women and incapability to accept their perspective, another is the objectification and oversexualisation of women. One post by @certifikovanagirlbosska explores the notion of constant need to assess how women are perceived by men, creating a feeling of distrust and disdain towards men. In their post they say ''*When he has a lot of female friends, so I now have to find out if he sees women as complex human beings or is just waiting to get laid''* (CGB17.2, see attachment). While it is important to remember that memes are an exaggerated expression of the self, stylized in a way that provokes a reaction from the audience, there is nevertheless a strong sense of urgency hidden in the memes calling out the inability to form meaningful relationships with men.

Lastly, the socio-economic realities of young people leave them overworked, overtly pressured to perform in a certain way leaving no space for meaningful socialisation. A perfect enumeration of the feeling expressed in these types of memes is this quote from a meme posted on March 1st 2022 stating ''*I can't have a breakdown, I have to go to the job that I got to pay for the two loans I took to pay for the degree I am studying while I work to pay for it.''* In a more muted sentiment, we can witness it through posts on the need for safe spaces, hobbies and forms of escape from the reality, in posts imagining the ideal community (one in which the socio-economic pressure does not exist). This is aligned with the cores and aesthetics mentioned above.

How are the ideal communities imagined in the studied memes? A great imagery of this community can be seen in a ten-slide post on the imaginary party the meme admins and their community would make whenever one of them would be blocked on Instagram by a certain creator, Marek Mach (more on Marek Mach can be found in the political references section below). On the third slide we see an imagined flat, where the party would take place. We see a Lidl snack area, cyber bullying room, depression room, a pole dance table, and a cocaine lounge. Each of these is an expression of a communal characteristic. We have already discussed Lidl, as a popular supermarket chain amongst young people. The cyber bullying room suggest that the ideal community is chronically online, and actively critiquing 'the other'. A depression room showcases a sense of awareness and acceptance of mental health issues. A pole dance table is positioned in an open space; sexual expression is welcomed in

the ideal community, celebrated. Both sexuality and mental health are often taboo topics in mainstream Slovak society. In further slides we see several other depictions of this imagined community, mostly having fun in an ambiguously sexual setting.

Overall, the posts related to mental health present about 50% of the dataset. This not only showcases subversion of the girlboss persona, which is always happy and content, but also reveals how big of a topic mental health is for the young audiences in Slovakia.

4.5.   Gender and queerness references

When it comes to gender, men have been referenced more often than women, especially in terms of satire directed at their behaviour. Women were satirized as well, but only in a political context (e.g. making fun of politicians and their behaviour. In all cases except for the mention of Zuzana Čaputová, the intent of the joke was to criticize the given female politician), men, however, were both mentioned in a political context, as well as in relationship dynamics. The image of a Slovak man depicted in the studied memes is one of an entitled, sexist, and ignorant one, unable to understand the female perspective, unable to form meaningful relationships with women. They are often proposed to be homophobic, and consequently shown in homoerotic situations.

Queerness can be seen in two scenarios: a self-expression (of one's queerness) or in a political critique. Self-expression ranges from subtle hints of queerness (such as @cicky_mitskis post about going back to the closet when coming back to Slovakia), which are mostly related to the poor social standing of the queer community in Slovakia or to formation of relationships and communities. Political critique is more common. Apart from the homoerotic innuendos made to draw attention to homophobic and sexist tendencies of male politicians (aforementioned men gatekeep politics to be able to hold hands with each other meme), we see explicit targeting of certain politicians and their voters (figure 8).

Figure 8. Instagram post by @certifikovanagirlbosska, 16.04.2022,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CcaOB2gtwIz/?img_index=8

The man on the left is Ľuboš Blaha and the man on the right is Erik Kaliňák. Ľuboš
Blaha, is a Slovak politician member of the SMER party, famous for his pro-Russian views
and anti-globalist sentiment. His online presence earned him a lot of attention as he often
indulges in hoaxes and borderline conspiracies. Based on the choice to make his signage
grammatically incorrect the author is laughing and belittling Blaha. Erik Kaliňák is the
nephew of one of the most prominent members of the SMER party, Róbert Kaliňák. Erik was
the leader of the youth segment of the supporters of the SMER party, he is now a member of
the party as well as a political youtuber. His signage, edited by the author, obviously, refers to
the LGBTQ+ community, but calls them ABCD as a way of claiming that Erik does not know
much about the topic or is trying to belittle the LGBTQ+ community. Along with the
description of the post, which reads *''when he's an activist''* we can assume that the main
message of the post is that these two politicians (and by default the SMER party) fight for
causes that go against the beliefs of the author, from which we can conclude that the author is
not pro-Russian and is in support of LGBTQ+. It also further portrays how the author finds
their opinions infantile and incompetent. The original photo would showcase Blaha and
Kaliňák holding a picture of doctor in a hazmat suit and the minister of healthcare at the time
on a beach vacation, and a termination of employment with immediate notice – from the
Slovak citizens. The original post can still be found on Kaliňák's facebook page. If one looks
close enough at the photo, we can see the author edited the name of the ministry (originally
the building of the ministry of healthcare) to a rather derogatory one. Whilst the original

photo posted by the politicians was concerned with healthcare during the pandemic, the author of the meme decided to use it to portray the general critique of their political views.

4.6.   Political references

With that analysis we can segway into the analysis of political references in the studied memes. It became clear throughout the five reference categories above that the political is woven into most of the studied memes. The questions of relationships are often tied to gendered inequalities, the struggles of mental health often steep from the socio-economic and political organisation of Slovakia, idealised communities are imagined in a politicized manner. Through these and the explicitly political posts a clear self-categorisation of the meme admins arises. In this section a series of memes will be analysed to showcase the political leanings of the meme content, and the rhetoric that is used to counter the hegemonic (in Slovakia's case liberal capitalist democracy) political organisation. Political content is the second most common one after posts about mental health. When identifying which politicians, parties and political discourse are criticized, one can understand the position of the meme admins, which stand in opposition to the mentioned actors. It is also interesting to point out that even if the materials used in the memes can be of international origin, only two of the political satire memes are concerned with the political situation outside of Slovakia. This creates a concentrated continuous critique of the Slovak political hegemony throughout the entire dataset.

4.6.1. Anti-liberalism, leftist inclination

There are several posts that address liberals as the other *('hey listen here liberal'* CGB14, see attachment), or create an image of 'us' which mentions the liberal as the other. One post creates an image of a liberal male stereotype, which asks the audience (which is presented as a woman) a question saying *'You're voting for PS? It that because they have a female chairman?'* (CGB40.7, see attachment) which continues the male critique we saw in both mental health and gender sections. Another post sources a song created by republican voters in America that went viral on TikTok which refers to (American) democratic voters as *'liberal chumps'*. Whilst the two-party system does not exist in Slovakia, and the republican – democratic divide neither, the description of the post, which claims that this song is the only hit the republicans managed to produce suggests the author of the meme does not agree with republican political vision, they do however share the sentiment on liberals (CGB8, see attachment). A post about community and friendship defines five points of good friendship

according to the author, one of which states that if one does not discuss new ways to bully liberals, it is not a true friendship (CGB15, see attachment).

What is more, we see memes which self-identify the author as a leftist (even though the critique of liberalism and right-wing politicians is rather clear even without explicit statements), one of the most popular ones being a reference to a trend that appeared on (not only girl-boss) Slovak meme accounts around March of 2022, mostly in the form of Instagram stories (which disappear after 24hours and hence were not included in this research). In the post we see a video of two girls, one of which represents the bingo trend and the other the meme admins, who are defined as *'leftist meme admins'* pining over the bingo (CM9, see attachment)

4.6.2. Targeting specific parties

Who are the parties that are targeted by political satire the most? Smer-SK, ĽSNS, HLAS and SNS, with most attention directed at their respective chairs. Within the post on men gatekeeping politics to hold hands, which was referenced before, we see two images, both of which show politicians shaking hands for the camera. Upper pair showcases Róbert Fico and Vladimir Putin shaking hands, whilst the lower one presents Peter Pellegrini shaking hands with Putin. Based on the time of posting, it is safe to assume this post is not only gender motivated, but also stands as a commentary on Slovak politicians' stance in the Ukrainian conflict. Ľuboš Blaha is also mentioned in two memes regarding Ukraine, as he is known to take a generally pro-Russian stance. We also see a post regarding ĽSNS voters and their racist views, and a satirical rendition of a photograph shared by Andrej Danko, the chairman of the Slovak National Party.

4.6.3. Critique of Slovak youth activists

Both the general anti-liberal sentiment and critique of specific parties overlap with prevalent critique of online political youth activists. This is a remarkably interesting section, as the post-girlboss meme admins could be seen as youth political activists as well. The biggest target of these posts is Marek Mach the founder of Mladí oz., an NGO that appeared in 2019, dedicated to bringing numerous issues to the youth, inform and educate them, as well as create campaigns and chances for involvement in the political discourse for youth. Mladí oz. is a liberal movement, which later branched out to have its own LGBTQ+ online community (Dúhy.sk), Environment site (Maldí za klímu), and a history site, dedicated to education surrounding the fascist movements in Slovakia (Maldí proti Fašizmu, which is

highly critical of the communist era). When the movement started, the reaction of the public was rather enthusiastic. However, the movement harnessed criticism from leftist meme pages for its hypocritical approach to history, greenwashing and limited political critical thinking fairly early on. Manifested in comments, messages and content posted about Marek Mach and his NGOs, many post-girlboss meme admins were consequently blocked by Marek Mach on Instagram. This prompted one of the most engaged with posts in the dataset, which depicted a party for the meme admin community, which would be thrown whenever one of them would get blocked as well. Another post refers to the situation by using the suicidal Squidward meme template which stated *'Please let me work at Maldi oz., I am normal and can be trusted to work around liberals'*(CGB4, see attachment). Few other activists are mentioned throughout the dataset, such as a Czech political videographer Debatní Deník, radio-host turned politician Michal Sabo, and a model and environmental activist Natália Pažická.

4.7.   Data analysis conclusion

As can be seen throughout the sections mentioned above, none of these categories are isolated from one another. In the graph below (figure 9) you can see a visualisation of the most common intersections of the topics and their size. More than a half of mental health posts are also concerned with gender and queerness. Political posts, rely on pop culture references and often contain queer policy demands. Locality and urban posts are connected to mental health. The line between pop culture and meme templates is one that is blurred the most, as it is in the nature of meme culture to be strongly interconnected with popular culture. One must also note the lack of certain content says as much about the data as the content that is seen and mentioned. For example, not a single post in the dataset is targeted at religion, neither in a positive or critical way. Similarly, disabilities are not mentioned, and mental health is never mocked or belittled, the only form of critique we see is self-targeted, rather focusing on the short coming and self-degradation of the meme admin than the mental illness or issue itself.
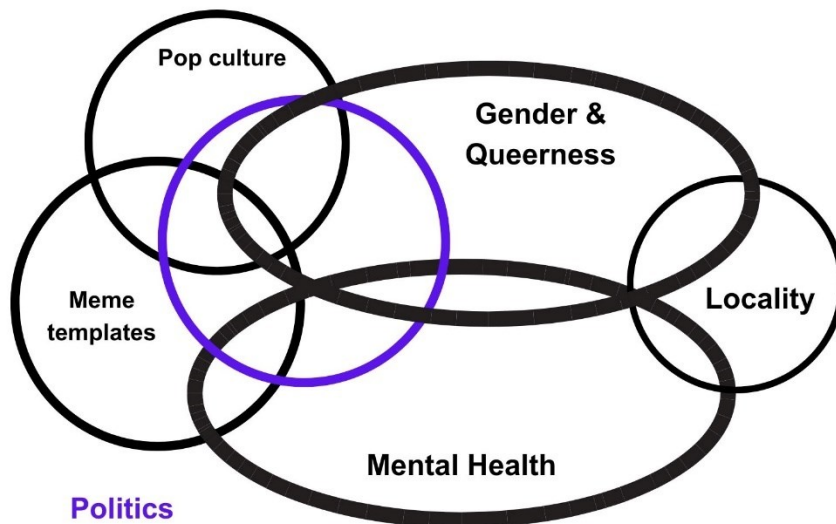
Figure 9. visualisation of topical intersection of studied memes

4.8.   Image of the meme admin

What can we conduct about the creators of these memes after analysing the content? Since meme creation, especially the one of post-girlboss nature relies heavily on sharing personal opinions, stories and experiences, the image of the meme admin becomes clear. It is important to say that when we are talking about the character of the meme admin, we keep in mind Bakhtin's carnivalesque and the importance of a mask or a persona – this thesis does not claim to understand the real life people existing behind these profiles, merely the persona they exhibit publicly. To know to what extent this persona overlaps with their real-life stances and experiences would demand a completely separate research.

When it comes to the age and gender of the meme admins, some make remarks about their educational experiences, proposing an idea of their age not overseeding that of high school and university students. To support this hypothesis, thanks to our analysis of post-girlboss memes content we can see that it relies heavily on youth targeted pop culture, deals with casual romantic relationships, dating and mental health struggles not exclusive to, but often found in young people. Gender wise, this thesis does not reach further than articulating that these admins communicate the struggles of girlhood often and so are assumed to have their own experience with such. It is also the deep-rooted critique of patriarchal values, especially when experienced through problematic and obstructing behaviour of boys and men that their understanding of such oppression comes from the position of the oppressed.

Another interesting characteristic that can be seen is the locality of the post-girlboss meme admins. Many of them reference specific, mostly urban spaces, such as supermarkets, or even more specifically stores and locations only found in the capital, Bratislava, or other big cities. The correlation between post-girlboss meme creation and life in urban setting does not speak of anything substantial itself, but it is noteworthy to mention that in Slovak context there are differences between the cities and the countryside in terms of communities, educational and professional opportunities and cultural exposure.

This point gets even more relevant when we understand that the studied meme admins are politically engaged and showcase profound understanding of Slovak political dynamics and have skills and language to express and position themselves within that context. When looking at the geographical political division of Slovakia, it is often the big cities, such as Bratslava or Košice, that stand out, and it is often in alignment with the hinted political positioning of the meme admins.

So far, we can claim that post-girlboss meme admins are likely to be young, female, educated and situated in urban areas of Slovakia. They are politically aware and active, as well as well versed in online trends and discourse. Another interesting aspect of studied meme admins is their ability for introspection and self-awareness. We see this through their posts on relationships, sex and mental health, which showcase a mature understanding of one's feelings and beliefs. In tandem with Mouffe's argument for normalising passions in a prospering pluralistic democracy, it is also an important sign of shifting from girlboss content to post-girlboss one. These memes do not shy away from portraying hardships and possible mental illnesses, in fact they showcase a preference for showing the negative rather than positive experiences. This decision to post personal stories of mental health struggles shows a desire to confide, normalise and open conversations which invite a strong sense of community with their audience. We do, in fact, see the audience responding to these posts by sharing their own experiences, positioning the meme admins not only as creators of memes, but also moderators of communal support (More on this in the audience section of data analysis).

Overall, post-girlboss meme admins showcase a strong intersectional drive. Whilst we do not know their motivation for doing so, meme admins create communities of acceptance of many non-mainstream issues, such as mental health, queerphobia, leftist politics and more. This disruption of online hegemonies is clear evidence of pluralism and subversive thought existing online. In the last section of this chapter, we will consider the possible image of the audience consuming these memes an interacting in the post-girlboss communities.

4.9.   Post-girlboss meme audiences

There are two main conclusions we can make about the audience based on the data collected in this thesis. Firstly, there are rarely any hashtags used in the post descriptions, therefore the content is distributed and finds its audience organically. From this we can assume that likeminded people share these accounts amongst themselves, or they find them on their discover pages on Instagram, because their interests are aligned with the topics mentioned in the memes. Therefore, we are most likely looking at an audience that in many ways mirrors the character of the meme admins in terms of knowledge of online discourse, Slovak politics, pop culture and locality. Second noteworthy field of exploration is the post-girlboss meme community from the perspective of the audience. In the digital space, the act of liking a post can represent taking a stand, supporting, relating. This can create a sense of safety for the marginalised groups (LGBTQ+) or subversive politically engaged persons (leftists). We can also see an overlap between a meme admin and the audience in the sense that the post-girlboss community is still rather contained, and hence the meme admins become the audience for other meme admins and vice versa, creating a strong sense of connection.

4.10.   Language

Last important finding the dataset provided is connected to the general language that is used throughout the memes and their description. Not only do the memes come in both Slovak and English, but they often use incorrect grammar, mostly use lower case letters, Slovakize English words (based = bejst, insta check = inta ček, cringe = krinč, fruity- queer slang = ovocní – the word only means fruity in the literal sense in Slovak language). Often the texts in the foreground of memes does not include punctuation and accents. Furthermore, the language that is used even when debating complex issues such as liberal democracy critique, feminism or queerphobia, remains simple and easy to understand (albeit not always easy to decode). This creates a sense of anti-intellectualism in the memes, a phenomenon that has been studied before, but mostly in English audience targeting memes (Zolides 2022). Anti-intellectual semiotics in the case of post-girlboss Slovak memes create a sense of approachability for the community, as the scope of the memes is rather niche and showcases the existence of a distinct online dialect of the Slovak language.

5.   Conclusion

Taking into consideration all the findings from the data analysis, it is safe to conclude that Slovak post-girlboss memes are actively posing as subversive cultural power to the Slovak

liberal democratic hegemony. The language, form and utilisation of plethora of references allow for a formation of rich content. This allows the online post-girlboss meme community to pose as a source of knowledge, as per Gramsci's ideas of hegemony. Whilst this research did not exhaust the topic at hand, it does set precedence for further research of Slovak online spaces. Future directions of such research would include a larger data set and seek political memes that are self-affiliated with different positions on the left-right spectrum. In the meantime, post-girlboss memes, and their creators, the meme admins, showcase how passionate communication can lead to open discussions and critique of the status quo. As such, Bakhtin's carnivalesque lives on.

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