

Kaitlin Killingsworth

Dr. Rosaleen Keefe

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Meme Analysis of Bernie Sanders Inauguration Meme



Brendan Smialowski | AFP | Getty Images

The meme I chose to analyze is the Bernie Sanders Inauguration Meme. The original photo was captured by Washington based photojournalist, Brendan Smialowski (Miao). It's unknown as to who first turned the image of the senator into a meme, but the photo seemingly blew up overnight. A Ph. D. student at Penn State, Ashley Smalls shared the photo on Twitter with the caption, "This could've been an email" (Miao). Another person, Heather Hill posted on Twitter a photoshopped image of Bernie in the famous Nighthawks painting by Edward Hopper

with the caption, “I am once again asking for some coffee. #berniesmittens” (Miao). The infamous mittens worn by Sanders, are credited to a woman named Jen Ellis, a Vermont schoolteacher (Miao). She states the mittens were made from repurposed wool sweaters and fleece made from recycled plastic bottles (Miao).

“Memes provide sound and expression that just normal sentences cannot” (Swoo). In the case of the Bernie Sanders Inauguration Meme this statement is true. That’s why we share memes – to represent what we’re feeling, to get our emotions across in a way that we can’t with just text. Two people can have a conversation with memes without even using other words. The meaning behind the meme is interpreted by the user and receiver based on the context. With, memes are often taken completely out of context of the original photo. Bernie is quoted as saying, “I was just sitting there trying to keep warm, trying to pay attention to what was going on” during an interview with late night host, Seth Myers (Miao).

To describe the visual style of the image, it has been photoshopped into many famous paintings, movie scenes, historical moments, and different time periods and places (Miao). Bernie appears to be “looking kinda cranky, dressed-down, tired, and world-weary” (Romano). That’s probably why the meme is often used to portray the feeling of discontent or impatience.



Achim Thomae/Getty Images, BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images

The delivery of the meme is it's a digital image that is photoshopped into other recognizable images and then shared on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. It is often accompanied by a caption, but not always. "To put Bernie Sanders into a picture, all you need is basic photoshop skills, and a photograph of your choosing to edit him into" (Kipling). Many people, including celebrities, have gotten in on the action putting Bernie alongside actors like Ryan Reynolds as Deadpool and as far as the moon in one meme (Hadden).

To understand the meme, you must have a basic understanding of who Bernie Sanders is and his aesthetic. This meme is for anyone who can relate to a funny image, but I would say it's mostly for his supporters who have a sense of humor along with, "millennials, Gen-Z-ers, and Extremely Online people across the political spectrum" (Romano). "In the grand scheme of communication, memes are syllogism – a combination of a major premise and a minor premise, in which the conclusion is gathered by deduction" (Swoo). The syllogistic argument of this meme could be:

All senators hold political power.

Bernie Sanders is a senator.

Therefore, Bernie Sanders holds political power.

Even Bernie started using the "I am once again asking for" meme to push his political agenda by saying on Twitter, "I am once again asking you to wear a mask" (Romano). Even if the meme isn't being used in politics, there will always be that political undertone to it because of who Bernie is. "Just as they did throughout 2020, Bernie memes provided an Inauguration Day entry point for many Americans into a fraught political moment. There may be an extraordinary amount of uncertainty and anxiety around the near future, but Bernie and his

reliable overcoat offer some much-needed familiarity, reassurance, and warmth (pun intended)” (Romano).

The meme sparked a lot of publicity for the senator, and he found a way to use it for good. The senator’s campaign store even released a crewneck sweatshirt featuring the mittens meme (Rathke). They gave 100% of the profits made from selling the shirt to Meals on Wheels Vermont (Rathke). The original creator of the mittens worn by the senator, Jen Ellis, also blew up on social media thanks to the sharing of the meme. She received thousands of requests for the mittens (Rathke). She had since stopped making the mittens but made just only three pairs to be auctioned off for charity and to put towards her daughter’s college fund (Rathke). She did however collaborate with Darn Tough Socks to go on to make many socks the same pattern as the mittens (Cooper). They donated the proceeds from the socks to food banks in Vermont (Cooper). Bernie’s infamous brown jacket that he wore also featured in the “I am once again asking for” meme, also sparked interest. Burton Snowboards went on to donate 50 of them to the Burlington Department of Children and Families (Rathke).

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