"lemme get uhhhhh froot": Internet memes for consciousness-raising in Aotearoa's Bird of the Year conservation campaign

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Bird of the Year has become a cultural phenomenon. Designed by Forest and Bird to raise awareness of New Zealand's endangered wildlife, the competition attracts engagement from dedicated campaign managers, fans, and baffled international news outlets. Internet memes have become an integral part of the competition. We analyse how Bird of the Year memes (*n* = 489) support engagement with the campaign. Our thematic analysis of 489 memes circulated on Facebook and Twitter revealed that memes invoke emotions, reflect and (re)produce identities, and encourage pro-environmental action. Memes mobilised humour and fear, cultural ideas about what it means to be a New Zealander, and information about how to conserve endangered species. Memes also self-referentially questioned the efficacy of memes for conservation, raising questions about the potentials and pitfalls of online engagement. Our findings point to the powerful psychological processes through which seemingly light-hearted memes can operate for consciousness-raising.

Key words: *Internet memes, consciousness-raising, conservation, digital activism, identity, emotion*

Introduction

New Zealanders' affiliation with native birdlife runs deeper than simply naming ourselves 'Kiwis'. The annual Bird of the Year competition to crown the nation's favourite native bird attracts fierce rivalry and is heralded as indicative of the New Zealand psyche (Hunt, 2019; Langstone, 2019). In this paper we examine the internet memes that have become a defining part of the Bird of the Year competition. Although seemingly light-hearted and frivolous, we argue that these memes are an important way everyday people engage with the purpose of the competition. We examine how memes function as a form of online consciousness-raising about the threats facing New Zealand's birdlife and explore their possibility to generate pro-environmental action.

Bird of the Year

Bird of the Year is a competition managed by Forest and Bird, a conservation organisation that works to raise awareness of New Zealand's native wildlife and advocate for protections for vulnerable species and ecosystems. Bird of the Year has become one of Forest and Bird's most popular campaigns, with over 40,000 votes cast in recent years (Radio New Zealand, 2020). The aim of the campaign is to raise awareness of the threats facing New Zealand's birds (Forest and Bird, n.d.). More than 80% of New Zealand's native bird species are threatened or at risk and 23 species face an immediate high risk of extinction (Department of Conservation, n.d.a; Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2017).

The digital environment offers exciting potential for conservation campaigns and initiatives. Digital engagement with conservation campaigns can be just as effective as real exposure to threatened species for generating emotional connection and attitude change as real exposure to threatened species (Skibins & Sharp, 2019). Digital media campaigns that offer multiple pathways for participation and forms of "entertainment engagement" can offer routes towards meaningful pro-environmental action (Senbel et al., 2014, p.84)

In this paper we examine a particular feature of the digital landscape—memes—and their operation within the Bird of the Year conservation campaign. Internet memes have become a defining feature of Bird of the Year. Forest and Bird encourages members of the public to campaign for their favourite bird. Campaigns are endorsed by politicians and celebrities and operate across the digital social media landscape including Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and Tinder (Green, 2020). Many campaign managers create dedicated social media accounts, sharing memes to support their candidate and oppose rivals (Huffadine, 2018). Although Bird of the Year and its associated internet memes have received widespread national and international media attention (Hunt, 2019; Taylor, 2019), we provide the first analysis of the psychological processes through which Bird of the Year raises awareness of conservation issues.

Internet memes and consciousness-raising

The term 'meme' was coined by Dawkins (1976) to describe a unit of cultural transmission analogous to the

gene. Internet memes are rapidly shared images, videos, audio, or text that are reconfigured as they spread, but retain a link to the items from which they originated (Börzsei, 2013; Castaño Díaz, 2013; Shifman, 2013). Memes fluctuate in popularity in short periods of time (Burton, 2019) and their meanings constantly change as they circulate through different online communities (Pettis, 2021). Part of memes' appeal is that, rather than commercially produced images such as advertisements, memes are produced by ordinary people—often with deliberately poor graphics and simple text (Burton, 2019).

Digital content that invokes strong emotional responses is more likely to spread (Guadagno et al., 2013) and memes that are "playfully serious" are more likely to become popular (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017, p. 44). The playful-serious nature of memes can provide a vehicle for speaking difficult truths in ironic ways (Owens, 2019). For example, depression memes speak the realities of living with mental illness in ways that can offer beneficial social support and emotion regulation for people experiencing clinical symptoms (Akram et al., 2020). Diaosi (loser) memes signal young people's disillusionment with socio-economic mobility and offer forms of affective identification for young people in China (Szablewicz, 2014). Memes can be particularly powerful for young people and members of marginalised groups who have traditionally been denied access to civic life as they offer accessible ways to exercise political voice and engage with cultural politics (Burton, 2019; Gal et al., 2016).

Memes are central to online participatory culture and digital activism, which has been conceptualised as contemporary forms of consciousness-raising (Anderson & Keehn, 2020; Gleeson & Turner, 2019). Memes are well suited for consciousness-raising activism because they are based on shared frameworks but require variation, meaning people can participate in collective action while maintaining a sense of individuality (Shifman, 2013). For example, feminist memes mobilise parody and humour to critique sexism in politics (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015) and everyday life (Jane, 2016). Similar techniques have been used to call attention to economic inequality in the Occupy Wall Street protests (Milner, 2013) and racial injustice in the Black Lives Matter movement (Dynel & Poppi, 2021).

Memes are increasingly being used to engage people in environmental issues. Many memes created by young people balance nihilistic feelings of eco-anxiety with calls for political action (Burton, 2019; Scott, 2019). The ease of creating and sharing memes facilitates civic engagement with environmental issues such as climate change (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Memes about climate change can invoke feelings of empathy and make viewers more likely to participate in climate change campaigns (Zhang & Pinto, 2021). Some conservation organisations have harnessed the power of memes to run successful campaigns. For example, Greenpeace protested oil company Shell's plans for oil drilling in the Arctic by creating memes based on Shell advertisements and encouraging members of the public to create their own (Davis et al., 2016). Research suggests that humorous memes can be effective in generating interest and concern for 'unappealing' endangered species who are less likely to feature in traditional conservation campaigns than their 'cute' counterparts (Lenda et al., 2020).

The tacit assumption of the Bird of the Year campaign is that increased awareness will translate into action to save New Zealand's at-risk birds. However, the knowledge-deficit approach to conservation has been widely criticised (Clayton et al., 2013; Kidd et al., 2019; Senbel et al., 2014). Knowledge of environmental problems like climate change and habitat destruction is necessary but not sufficient to engender action (Schultz, 2011). Understanding the psychological drivers of behavioural change, such as engaging values (Saunders et al., 2006) and tailoring messages to different audiences (Kidd et al., 2019), might better support conservation campaigns to translate awareness into action. Memes fulfil important psychological functions, from expressing social identities (Burton, 2019; Eschler & Menking, 2018) to maintaining communities and ideologies (Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Yet how do memes operate as consciousness-raising endeavours? In this paper, we examine how internet memes support engagement with the Bird of the Year conservation campaign and explore memes' self-referential engagement with debates around their potential for inspiring action.

METHODS

Positioning and Theoretical Framework

The current study was conducted using a poststructural framework, meaning we acknowledge there is no one 'truth' about Bird of the Year memes to be discovered. Rather, any knowledge we produce is partial, bound by culture and context, and shaped by who we are as researchers (Acker, 2001; Harrison et al., 2001). This study grew out of the Qualitative and Critical Collective, a group of graduate students at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington who discuss issues and ideas relating to critical psychology and qualitative methods. All authors of this paper are women psychology graduate students or early career researchers in our twenties and thirties. We identify as politically left-wing and describe ourselves as feminists and environmentalists. We vary in our familiarity with internet memes and qualitative methods. We took a reflexive approach to our research, considering at each stage of the research how our various subject positions impacted on data collection, analysis, and discussion.

Data Collection

After an initial meeting discussing Bird of the Year memes from our own social media feeds (approximately 30 memes), we created a corpus of memes to examine the role of memes in Bird of the Year. We collected publicly available memes from Facebook and Twitter and obscured names and profile pictures to protect the identity of individuals who shared or interacted with the memes.

We first searched Facebook using #birdoftheyear and identified fan pages that had posted at least 10 memes related to Bird of the Year. Nine pages campaigned for a specific bird, while the tenth, "Feathery Memes for New Zealand Bird Teens", posted general Bird of The Year memes and reposted memes from other pages. We collected 487 memes between 17-30 November 2019.

Table 1. Overview of the 12 Facebook pages from which the Bird of the Year memes were sourced.

Page name	# Memes posted	Average engagement with meme	Bird Placings
Team Kākāpō	77	160.3	2008 Bird of the Year
Feathery Memes for New Zealand Bird Teens	68	237.1	N/A
Hoiho - Bird of the Year 2019	66	107.3	2019 Bird of the Year
Kererū 2019	54	205.4	2018 Bird of the Year
Takahē for bird of the year	47	50.4	-
Rockhopper Penguin #birdoftheyear	46	33.0	-
Courageous Kakī Memes for Bird of the Year Voting Teens	37	12.8	-
NZ Falcon/Kārearea BOTY 2019	28	29.0	2012 Bird of the Year
NZ Dotterel/Tūturiwhatu for Bird of the Year	24	9.0	-
South Island Kōkako for Bird of the Year 2019	16	19.4	2016 Bird of the Year
Vote Rifleman for Bird of the Year 2017	14	9.0	-
Tawaki for bird of the year 2019	10	12.6	-

Memes had been posted between 8 October 2017 and 10 November 2019. See Table 1 for information about the 12 Facebook pages used to source memes.

Given the large number of memes in our corpus, we completed an initial round of coding to ascertain which memes were candidates for a more in-depth thematic analysis. We considered the memes only, rather than including accompanying captions and comments. For this initial round of coding, the first and last authors independently recorded which Facebook page had posted each meme, the engagement each meme received (i.e., the combined number of reactions to each post, including 'likes' and other emotion-specific reactions like 'angry' or 'sad' faces), which specific bird (if any) each meme supported, whether each meme contained comparisons to other specific birds, and whether each meme was a candidate for analysis. Memes were considered candidates for thematic analysis if they accomplished something over and above communicating that a specific bird should win, or that New Zealand native birds are, in general, interesting or worthy of admiration. PW coded a subset of the memes (35%; 171 memes) using the same criteria. Memes were taken to the wider research team if one or more coders had marked it as a candidate for analysis. When marking a meme for analysis, coders made brief notes of their reasoning for why the meme met the analysis criteria (e.g., "promotes conservation", "contains New Zealand cultural reference").

Before conducting our thematic analysis, we searched for Bird of the Year memes on Twitter to ensure we had not overlooked any memes suitable for analysis or which differed significantly from the memes we had collected from Facebook. Most Bird of the Year campaigners have a Twitter account and a Facebook fan page and post the same content to both sites. However, we suspected that some Bird of the Year fans may create Bird of the Year content that is posted to Twitter, but not Facebook. We searched #birdoftheyear on Twitter and collected an additional three memes to add to our corpus and subset of memes for in-depth analysis. As such, after this initial coding process, we were left with 489 memes in total and 188 candidate memes for thematic analysis. All deidentified memes are publicly available at OSF: https://osf.io/3zhkr/.

Iterative Development of Research Question

Developing a research question for a qualitative study is often an evolving process where researchers reformulate their question in response to shifts in theoretical framing and new insights that arise during data collection (Agee, 2009). Although research questions typically become more focused as a study progresses, we made the decision to broaden our research question during data collection and analysis. We first decided to explore how memes reflected and constructed New Zealand cultural identity. However, while collecting memes for our data corpus we realised this research question was too narrow and revised it to examine how memes reflect New Zealand values and ideals. This question was further broadened after coding the candidate memes for analysis, as our coding included ideas worthy of further exploration, but which were outside the initial scope of our research question. As such, the final research question investigates how memes support engagement with the Bird of the Year competition.

Data Analysis

We coded the memes using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset. Thematic analysis is typically used to analyse written text but is increasingly used as a visual methodology to analyse images or a combination of written text and images (Choi, 2018; Ponnam & Dawra, 2013).

The memes were coded in data sessions involving seven of the eight authors. Each meme was displayed on a data projector, and we used a whiteboard to create and map codes: "pithy labels identifying what is of interest in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 2). As we were still

refining our research question at this stage of data analysis, we used complete coding (where we coded anything of interest in the data) rather than exclusively creating codes relevant to our research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following coding, we used our simple, descriptive codes to identify higher-order and complex themes that captured patterns of meaning in our dataset. For example, codes such as "ways of being", "New Zealand identity", and "cultural references" were folded into a higher-order theme about reflecting and (re)producing identity (see second theme below). At the end of this process, we had identified three themes that captured how memes operate in the Bird of the Year competition.

ANALYSIS

Our thematic analysis of how memes work to support engagement in Bird of the Year identified three themes. We found that memes invoked emotional responses, reflected and (re)produced identities, and debated the potential for pro-environmental action. We provide an overview of each theme in the sections below. Where relevant we provide background about the origins of the meme to better contextualise the meme. Although we did not consider the memes' captions and comments during coding, we include the captions and comments of our exemplar memes to support our thematic analysis.

Memes Invoke Emotional Responses

During data analysis, one of the most noticeable aspects of Bird of the Year memes was their potential to invoke emotional responses among our research group. Although humour is often treated as a defining feature of memes (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017), memes involved in activism can be serious (Dynel & Poppi., 2021). Some Bird of the Year memes are humorous, supporting light-hearted engagement with birds. Other memes leverage humour to convey serious environmental messages, supporting consciousness-raising through the competition.

Humorous Memes

Figure 1 shows an example of a meme we coded as funny. A kererū (New Zealand wood pigeon, Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae) appears from a car window at a McDonald's Drive-Thru and places an order with the caption "lemme get uhhhhh froot". This meme is an iteration of the "Can I Get Uhhh" meme parodying indecision at fast food restaurants, which became part of drug culture, invoking the confusion of someone ordering under the influence (KnowYourMeme, 2018).

Figure 1 brought forth chuckles from our research group each time we came across it. The meme is humorous for several reasons. Not only are kererū incapable of speaking and driving cars, but "froot" does not feature on McDonalds' menu in any meaningful sense. Moreover, the meme is relatable—many of us have also experienced such moments of indecision while ordering food. The association between the original meme and substance use invokes the kererū's reputation for routinely becoming intoxicated by eating fermented fruit and falling out of trees (Roy, 2018). The connection between kererū and drunkenness is also extended in the caption which refers to a "6 pack of froot".

Humorous memes like Figure 1 present native birds as relatable and endearing, offering a light-hearted form of engagement. Birds like the kererū are material for users to make and share jokes (see iteration of further memes in the comment section). By contrast, other memes leveraged humour to make serious points, supporting a

Figure 1. "lemme get uhhhhh froot" Kererū, an example of humorous Bird of the Year memes.

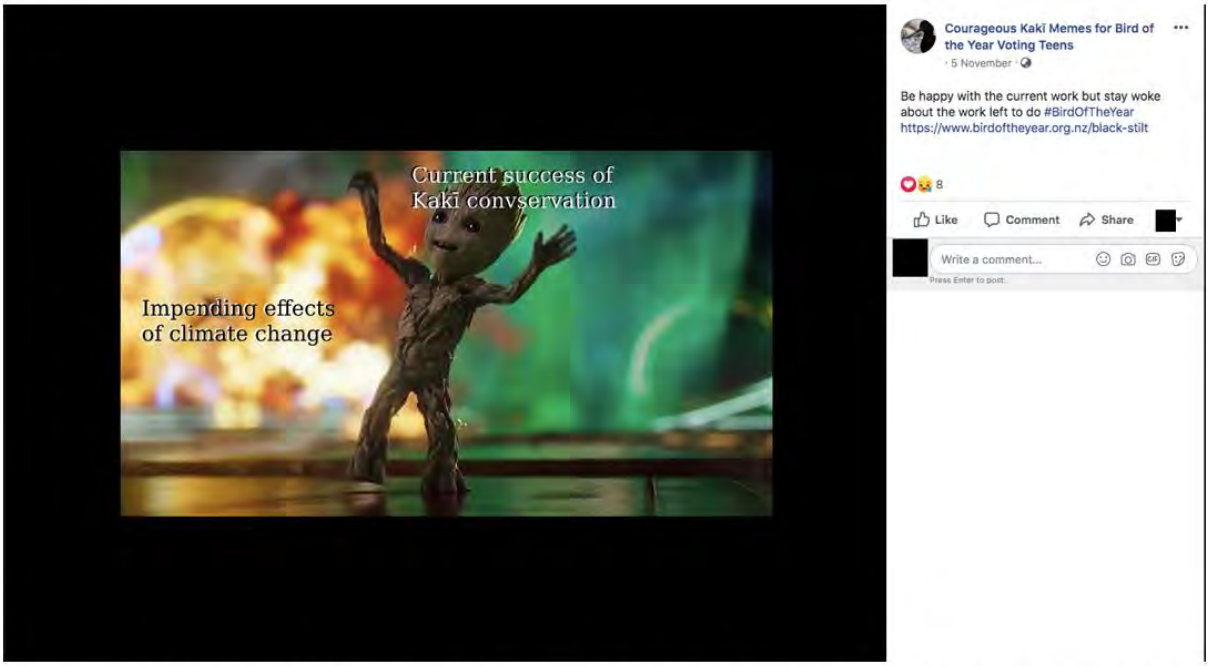

Figure 2. Dancing Baby Groot Amidst Explosions, an example of dark humour in Bird of the Year memes.

different form of engagement with native birds and conservation.

Dark Humour Memes

Figure 2 is an example of a meme we coded as funny and upsetting. The meme is a screenshot from the film Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 where Baby Groot, a tree-like character, dances happily despite the explosion behind him. The image is overlaid with text that links Baby Groot's dance with recent conservation success and the background explosion as the "impending effects of climate change."

The meme leverages a funny image, and a reference to a funny moment in the film, to deliver a serous point. The meme draws the viewer in with an entertaining cultural reference before invoking feelings of sadness with the harsh reality of climate change. The caption directs viewers to celebrate conservation success "but stay woke about the work left to do" Thus, contrasting emotions of humour, celebration, and fear are leveraged to argue for the necessity of ongoing conservation efforts.

In the context of Bird of the Year, light-hearted memes can endear viewers to native birds while dark humour memes can communicate important messages about conservation. Emotions are invoked by drawing connections with the viewer, whether relating to the struggles of an intoxicated kererū ordering take-out or by juxtaposing emotions to warn against the dangers of complacency in the face of climate change.

The way that memes invoke emotion is closely linked to identity, which we explore in the following section.

Memes Reflect and (Re)produce Identities

A second way that memes support engagement with Bird of the Year is through identity. In this section we analyse how memes articulated aspects of a shared (or contested) national identity and how this supports engagement with the competition.

National Identity

The local character of Bird of the Year memes was reflected in the number of memes that articulated aspects of a shared national identity.

Figure 3 is a grid of six photographs of native birds entitled 'NZ Bird coffee orders' with lists of behavioural and personality characteristics for each bird. This meme is an iteration of the tag-yourself-tag-a-friend meme where viewers are encouraged to identify themselves or others with a particular bird—made explicit in the caption "tag urself". This dynamic is evident in the first comment post where the user has nominated a bird for a friend.

The tag-yourself meme format offers an explicit way to express identities (Burton, 2019) and here different native birds are presented as emblematic of different 'types' of New Zealanders. The typology presents coffee-drinking as a part a New Zealand identity and suggests the kind of coffee and how it is ordered are indicative of personality. The meme works by invoking viewers' presumed knowledge of native birds. Knowledge about different species' characteristics makes understandable the contrast between the nocturnal kiwi (Apteryx mantelli) who is polite to the barista and "happy to shout the crew" and the notoriously destructive kea (Nestor notabilis) who "screams and rips things apart" if they don't get their drink. Likewise, knowledge about local news events, such as the police removal of kororā (little blue penguin, Sphenisciformes spheniscidae) from a sushi cart in central Wellington (Cropp, 2019) allows viewers in on the joke.

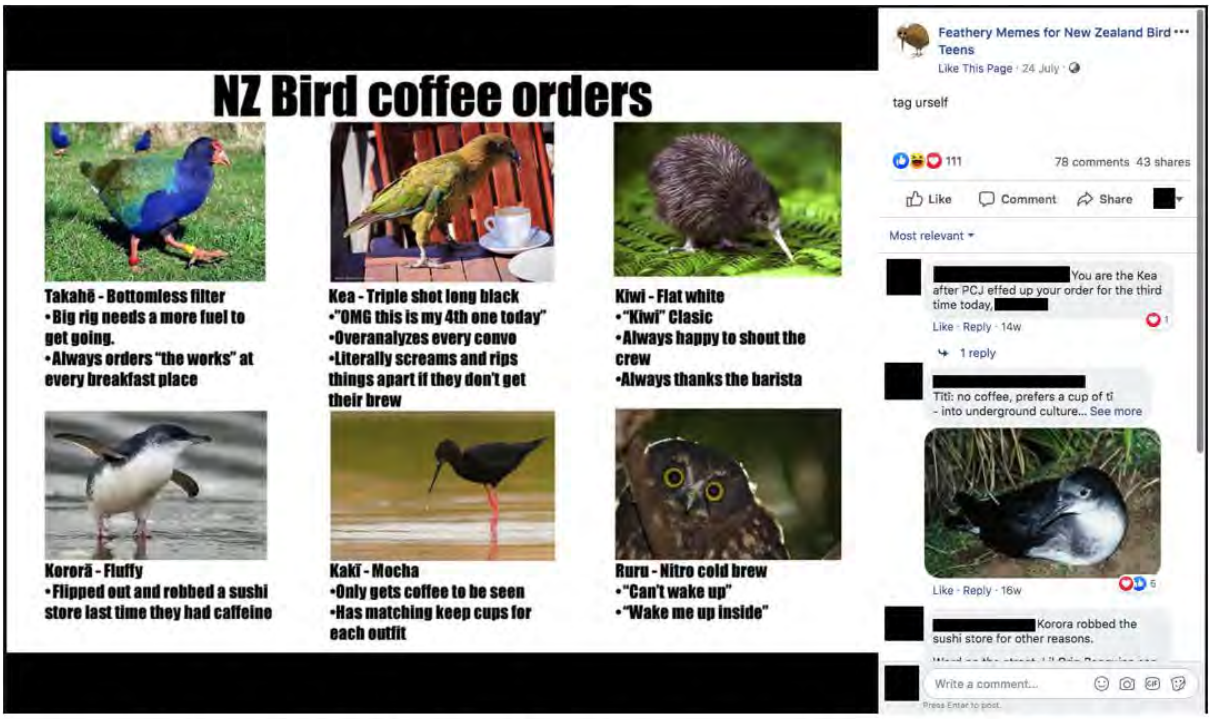

Figure 3. New Zealand bird's coffee orders, an example of memes highlighting similarities between birds and voters.

By encouraging viewers to see themselves (and others) as the birds depicted, the meme encourages identification with native birds. Likewise, identifying birds with anthropomorphised human traits and behaviours encourages affiliation and engagement with native species. Shared by the Facebook group 'Feathery memes for New Zealand bird teens', this meme draws connections between viewers and birds without directly intervening in the Bird of the Year competition. The same dynamic evident is in Figure 4A, a meme shared by the 'Hoiho for Bird of the Year' Facebook group. The meme (re)inscribes features of national identity to present the hoiho as relatable in order to solicit votes.

Figure 4A is built from a photograph of a hoiho (yellow-eyed penguin, Megadyptes antipodes) overlaid with text captions in a style characteristic of image macro memes (Davison, 2012). The use of "our spirit animal" as the meme caption suggests the hoiho represents some inner aspect of shared New Zealand identity, while the overlaid text reproduce characteristic national features. For example, the spelling of "fush and chups" references both the New Zealand accent and an iconic national meal. The suggestion that the hoiho considers this a "balanced diet" and is "a bit socially awkward" reference the 'Kiwi humour' popularised internationally by artists such as Flight of the Conchords and Taika Waititi (Robinson, 2019).

Generational Identity

Figure 4B represents a different way identification between birds and viewers was realised. The top panel is an illustration of a kākāpō (owl parrot, Strigops habroptilus) at a podium, surrounded by kākāpō chicks, announcing that they will win Bird of the Year. The bottom panel is a screenshot from the New Zealand House of Parliament where Member of Parliament Chlöe Swarbrick responds "ok boomer" to a heckler during a speech about the Zero Carbon Bill. Swarbrick's face has been overlaid with a photograph of a hoiho.

The meme draws on real political event, linking kākāpō with Baby Boomers and hoiho with Swarbick. The quip "ok boomer" is as a pithy retort to comments from the Baby Boomer generation (Lim & Lemanski, 2020) and Swarbick's use of it in Parliament went viral online (Carlisle, 2019). Knowledge about native birds is required to make sense of the layered generational joke here. Male kākāpō make a booming sound to attract mates and so, in a literal sense, are boomers. Like others in the dataset, this meme links the booming kākāpō with the Baby Boomer generation. Although kākāpō remain critically endangered, they are a flagship conservation species who have received intensive funding and support from the Department of Conservation (Department of Conservation, n.d.b). Kākāpō won Bird of the Year in 2008 and in 2019 reported their best breeding season on record (Department of Conservation, 2019). Many campaigns argued that a previous winner should not be crowned again.[i]

Kākāpō, who have already won Bird of the Year and currently benefit from conservation efforts, are associated with Baby Boomers who also benefit from systematic societal advantages. The hoiho is identified as Swarbick, the youngest Member of Parliament and a vocal member of the Green Party (a green and left-wing political party). The meme thus works to disavow kākāpō's legitimacy as a candidate and position hoiho as the voice of a younger generation.

The first two sections have demonstrated how memes support engagement with Bird of the Year through the

A

B

Figure 4. Hoiho macro meme (Panel A) and Ok Boomer Hoiho (Panel B), two examples of memes highlighting similarities between birds and voters.

Figure 5. Simpsons Angry Mob meme, an example of memes as an accessible source of information.

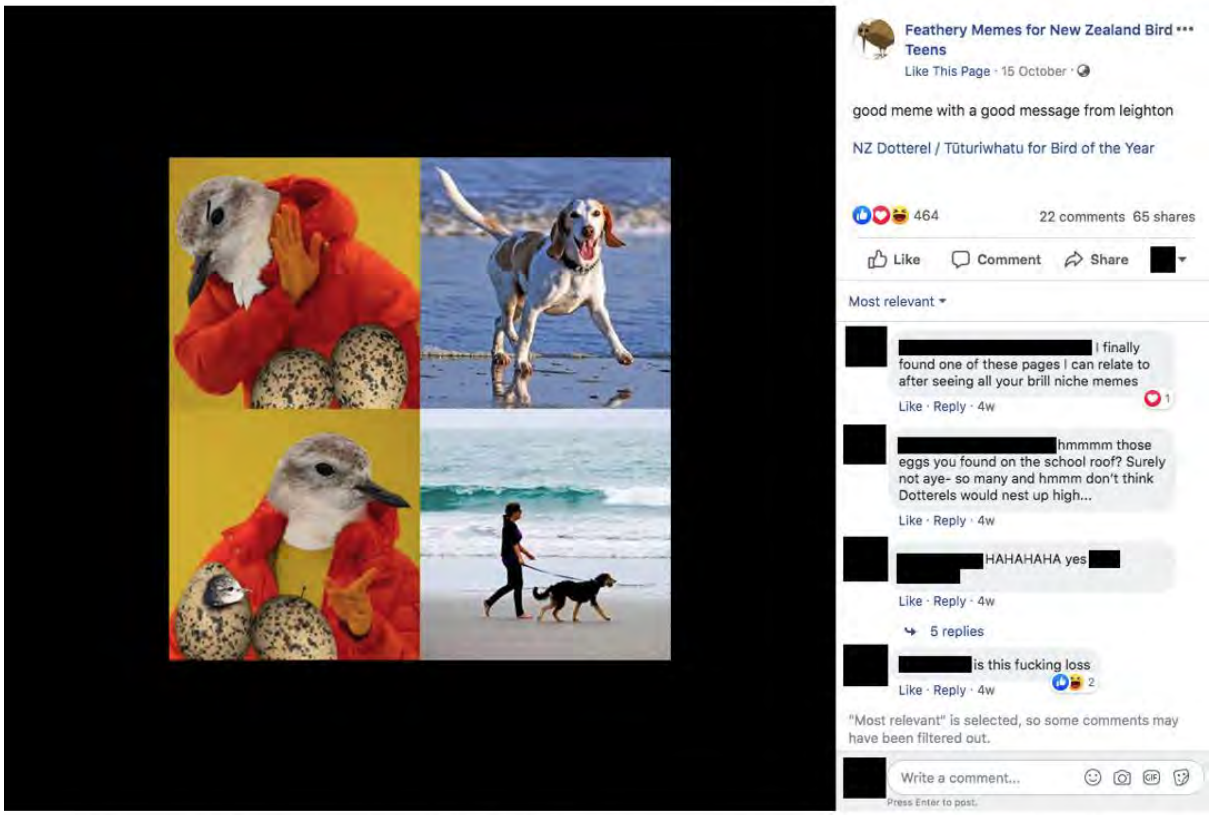

Figure 6. Drakeposting tūturiwhatu, an example of memes advocating for behavioural change.

psychological processes of invoking emotion and identity. But whether these forms of engagement constitute consciousness-raising or translate to action remains in question. The final section examines the possibilities for memes to further pro-environmental action.

Memes Encourage Pro-environmental Action

Memes conveyed contradictory positions about their possible impacts in conservation efforts. In this section we first present memes that argue for and demonstrate the possibilities for conservation education and behavioural change. The final example raises questions about the efficacy of digital engagement compared to other forms of political action.

The Power to Educate

Figure 5 offers a meta-commentary on memes' ability to support conservation. The image consists of still images from The Simpsons Movie overlaid with text captions. The caption "me" positions the viewer as Homer Simpson, staring in alarm at a mob of townsfolk who represent "being too busy to learn about conservation issues". The solution comes in the form of "bird memes", offered as an escape by friendly neighbour. This meme self-referentially suggests that digital media can offer accessible routes to learn about native birds and conservation. Memes are thus presented as an accessible form of education for those who would otherwise be "too busy".

Although knowledge alone is insufficient for behavioural change (Schultz, 2011), knowledge of social problems is necessary to address them (Pothitou et al., 2016). To care about the fate of endangered native birds and act, one must first be aware of the issue. Memes are constructed from recognisable visual images, and are integrated into personal social media feeds, so can offer time-poor individuals an accessible medium to engage with conservation issues. Given that access to time and education are unequally distributed in society, memes may be uniquely suited to educate mass audiences and engender pro-environmental action.

An example of environmental education through memes is demonstrated in Figure 6. Although Figure 6 is constructed from multiple layers it presents a conservation message that is easy to grasp, even without knowledge of the meme's background. The original images on the left panel are screenshots from a music video by hip hop artist Drake. In the top image, Drake holds up his hand and expresses disgust, while in the bottom he points his finger approvingly. In the four-panel format, Drake or a superimposed image (here, the bird) communicates a negative and positive stance towards the adjacent images. The meme presents a comparison between two scenarios. In the first, the tūturiwhatu (New Zealand dotterel, Charadrius obscurus) frowns and turns aside from an image of an unleashed dog on the beach. In the second, the bird gestures approvingly towards a dog on a leash and is accompanied by a hatched chick. The personified tūturiwhatu indicates disapproval of unleashed dogs, portraying a key conservation goal to restrict pet dogs' access to tūturiwhatu nesting sites (Department of Conservation, n.d.c).

Figure 6 is an example of meme with low barrier to entry for viewers to learn about, care, and potentially enact behavioural change for pro-environmental ends. People who might be otherwise too busy to learn about conservation issues can learn at a glance that tūturiwhatu nest on beaches, that dogs pose a threat to tūturiwhatu, and that a simple solution is to walk dogs on a leash. The standard format of Drakeposting memes provides a script for interpretation (rejecting the first scenario in favour of the second) which allows complex ideas to be conveyed with greater cognitive fluency. Both knowledge and

Figure 7. Bird of the Year Sword of a Thousand Truths, an example of memes advocating for political action.

personal values are important predictors of pro-environmental actions (Bolderdijk et al., 2013). For people who value native wildlife (and are members of the Facebook group "Feathery Memes for New Zealand Bird Teens"), this informational message may align with their values and promote pro-environmental behaviour that can conserve the tūturiwhatu's habitat.

However, some memes raised questions about the efficacy of memes and the Bird of the Year competition.

The Efficacy of Memes for Conservation

Figure 7 is a modified web comic where characters encounter the Sword of Truths. The third panel has been altered so the truth spoken by the sword reads "If you enjoyed BOTY [Bird of the Year] you should donate or volunteer to save birds and other wildlife in real life.". This meme was posted after the announcement of the winner of the 2018 Bird of the Year and appeals for continued engagement in conservation efforts beyond the competition.

The meme draws a contrast between enjoying the competition and meaningful action. The suggestions of volunteering and donating are classic examples of traditional political action that are often contrasted against forms of online participation (McCafferty, 2011). Like much of the debate around activism and digital media, this meme suggests that participating in a (largely online) competition for Bird of the Year is not enough. Instead, the uncomfortable truth revealed by the Sword of Truths is that people who voted for their favourite bird "should" also donate or volunteer. Notably, these forms of political engagement presuppose time and money that can be contributed. As critics have demonstrated (e.g., Storr & Spaaij, 2016) these presuppositions can structure activism in ways that are exclusionary or elitist.

A salient concern for Bird of the Year is whether memes—and the contest itself—translate into actions which help New Zealand's critically endangered wildlife. Memes are an engaging format that can provide information, such as pro-environmental behavioural change strategies. However, memes may be enjoyed and shared without leading to actions that contribute to tangible change.

DISCUSSION

We examined memes' potential for consciousness-raising by analysing memes circulating through the Bird of the Year conservation campaign. Bird of the Year is one of Forest and Bird's most successful campaigns with widespread local and international media coverage (Hunt, 2019). Although launched in 2005 as an email-based campaign, the competition has adapted well to the digital landscape and internet memes have become a key part of the competition in recent years. Some memes are created by campaigns for specific birds while others participate in or comment on the competition more broadly. Our thematic analysis identified that memes support engagement with the campaign by invoking emotions, reflecting and reproducing identities, and encouraging pro-environmental action.

Humour is a defining character of internet memes (Guadagno et al., 2013) and many Bird of the Year memes were humorous and whimsical. Memes are layered intertextual objects that combine local community knowledge with global cultural influences (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). Both local knowledge about native birds and familiarity with global pop culture references can be necessary to 'get the joke'. For example, knowing that kereru get 'drunk' on fermented berries, and that the "can I get uhhh" meme format is associated with drug culture adds a layered dimension to what would otherwise be a curious (but less humorous) image of a super-imposed bird at a drive through (Figure 1). Likewise, knowledge about news events (such as the kororā sushi incident; Cropp, 2019; Figure 3), or shared understandings of national characteristics (a love of "fush and chups" and an awkward disposition) are necessary for the operation of memes' humour. The humour of Bird of the Year memes is thus distinctly local in character.

Seemingly light-hearted memes can function for consciousness-raising by increasing engagement with native birds and reflecting and (re)producing ideas about what it means to be a New Zealander. The links between emotion and identity were mobilised as strategies to solicit votes for different campaigns. Memes drew connections between birds and viewers, encouraging viewers to see themselves as birds and portraying birds with anthropomorphised traits and behaviours. These traits and behaviours clustered as features of national or generational identities (e.g. being a tidy Kiwi or an underdog competitor). Memes are powerful tools for constructing identities (Eschler & Menking, 2018; Gal et al., 2016) and maintaining communities (Burton, 2019; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Engagement with native birds through Bird of the Year memes can be a means through which shared ideas about New Zealand identities and values can be circulated and negotiated.

Bird of the Year memes also make use of emotion and identity for more explicit consciousness-raising aims. Some memes juxtaposed playful images with serious messages about conservation, climate change, and the dangers of complacency (e.g., Figure 2). Others conveyed information about pro-environmental behaviours like walking dogs on leashes in nesting areas (e.g. Figure 6). Digital engagement with conservation campaigns can be just as effective as in-person exposure to threatened species (Skibins & Sharp, 2019) and humorous memes may be uniquely suited for increasing engagement with "unappealing" species (Lenda et al., 2020, p.1200). Bird of the Year memes can act as a form of "entertainment engagement" that has been shown to support pro-environmental action (Senbel et al., 2014, p.84)

However, a distinctive subgroup of memes offered meta-commentary about the role of memes for consciousness-raising. On the one hand, memes can be an accessible way to "learn and care about conservation issues" (Figure 6). Knowing and caring about the fate of endangered bird is a necessary first step for conservation action, and increasing awareness is part of Bird of the Year's aim as a conservation campaign. Memes can be a forum through which people can learn about environmental issues (e.g. threatened species; climate change), become motivated to care (through emotional involvement) and be informed about actions they can take. On the other hand, knowledge and emotional engagement is not sufficient to engender behavioural change (Schultz,

2011). Some memes made this explicit, arguing those who enjoyed the competition should "donate or volunteer to save birds and other wildlife in real life" (Figure 7). Memes thus self-referentially addressed questions about digital activism's ability to bring about meaningful change (Gleeson & Turner, 2019).

Our analysis illuminates the psychological processes through which Bird of the Year memes increase engagement with New Zealand's native birdlife and, in some cases, raise awareness of conservation issues. Given the widespread threats facing Aotearoa's indigenous wildlife—and the centrality of native birds in how New Zealanders see ourselves—internet memes have potential to make a real difference in conservation efforts. Despite Bird of the Year's popularity and reach, we found no published data on whether the widespread circulation of memes is connected to donation activity or the uptake of pro-environmental behaviours. International research suggests viewing humorous memes increases viewers' emotional engagement and donation decisions (Lenda et al., 2020) but this is yet to be tested in New Zealand. Future research could investigate whether Bird of the Year memes are effective in their attempts to translate online engagement to conservation efforts.

In the Bird of the Year competition, lines of difference (such as campaigns for different birds) are largely in jest, and their calls to action endorse pro-environmental behaviour. Yet the same mechanisms of humour, appeals to identity, and calls to action have been deployed to form and police communities in exclusionary and even violent ways (Eschler & Menking, 2018; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). For example, memes were intimately connected to violence in the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack, with the killer framing his actions as a real-life escalation of meme-based violence, including memes in his manifesto, and posting about his actions in online communities (Romano, 2019). Feminist researchers highlight memes as a site for "acceptable" sexism, particularly when couched in humour (Drakett et al., 2018; Massanari & Chess, 2018). The potential for internet memes to help and to harm emphasises the need for ongoing research investigating these tensions, as well as the real-world consequences of creating and sharing internet memes.

Concluding Comments

Aotearoa New Zealand's Bird of the Year contest is designed to raise awareness of endangered native species and has become a cultural phenomenon. The circulation of internet memes is an integral part of the competition. Here, we highlight the psychological processes through which Bird of the Year memes function as a form of online consciousness-raising. Internet memes support engagement with the Bird of the Year campaign by invoking emotion, reflecting and (re)producing New Zealand identities, and communicating conservation messages. Moreover, Bird of the Year memes have an ability to self-reflect by considering their own potential for enacting real-world change. We encourage further research on the psychology of internet memes, and exploration of their potential to help our feathered friends.

[i] Although, this did go on to happen in 2020, when the kākāpō won.

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Authorship Contributions
The study concept was developed collaboratively by all authors. The data corpus was created by GF, KM, JS, PW, and SH. Initial coding was completed by GF and ET with support from PW. Data analysis was conducted by GF, FG, JS, SH, KM, PW, and ET. GF, FG, JS, and ET wrote the manuscript, and KR provided critical revisions. ET and GF revised the manuscript in response to reviewers' feedback. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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