

## IMPACT OF MEMES ON POLITICAL NARRATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF INSTAGRAM

Ayesha Sajjad\*<sup>1</sup>, Iman Zahra<sup>2</sup>, Ayesha Ashraf<sup>3</sup>, Ali Bhadur<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Undergraduate Student, Department of Digital Communication and Media, GCU, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>4</sup>Lecturer, Department of Media and Communication Studies, GCU, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>1</sup>itsayesha1529@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>imanzahra210@gmail.com, <sup>3</sup>ayeshaashrafashraf0@gmail.com,

<sup>4</sup>alibhadur@gcu.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: \*

Ayesha Sajjad

### Abstract

With a particular focus on Instagram as a digital communication platform in Pakistan, this study investigates the influence of political memes on the creation and modification of political narratives. Memes have become a potent type of user-generated content in the changing media landscape. They use humor, images, and text to convey difficult political concepts in an approachable and interesting way. The study intends to examine the characteristics of political memes, pinpoint their function in narrative framing, identify ideological biases, and evaluate their impact on young users' perceptions and political engagement. A purposely chosen sample of twenty political memes was subjected to content analysis, semiotic analysis, and multi-modal discourse analysis using a qualitative research design. The results show that political memes are primarily employed as satirical and critical tools, frequently focusing on political figures rather than policies. Ideological stances are often reflected in these memes, which reinforce particular political viewpoints and help create echo chambers. Humor was found to be a popular communication tactic that both increases audience participation and makes difficult political subjects easier to understand. The study also emphasizes how repeated exposure to meme content shapes perceptions and directs public attention toward particular political issues, especially among younger audiences. Memes promote political expression and participation, but they also run the risk of trivializing important issues and encouraging divisive viewpoints. Overall, the study emphasizes how memes play a dual role in modern digital culture as tools for political participation and manipulation.

### 1-INTRODUCTION

In the present digital world, political discussion has evolved from old news stories into more easier and feasible form of dissemination of information to the general public. The shift from traditional media forms to Audience-centric and user-driven online spaces occurred within a very short period of time. Various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and X (formerly known as

twitter) has emerged new form of expression on public through a completely different pattern i.e memes. The term "meme" was first introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, where it denoted a unit of cultural transmission – an idea, behavior, or symbol that replicates through imitation, much like genes do in biological evolution (Mascarenas 87).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the emergence of internet memes gained cultural popularity in no time bringing new twist in changing narratives of people. Internet memes spread from person to person through all social media platforms. Especially due to a famous phrase or line from a political leader to gain attention from public. The impact of memes has crossed humor level; as they play a critical role in constructing and impacting political narratives. By purposely highlighting the impact of certain events and personalities, memes contribute to impact political narratives driving attention to what's been important for people to perceive.

Memes are defined as the new form of info distribution that conveys messages to the audience on a lighter note. By utilizing the social media platforms purposely important information and relevant events are conveyed to the general public to get opinions . This is done mostly by using humor correctly to lessen the intensity of a topic and highlighting what is more important. The social media platforms being a tool used to reach messages to a larger audience. In political memes there is a strategic use of visuals and combination of captions which are used to convey information. A political meme is usually a controversial visual message frequently seen on social media influencing public opinions and political narratives (Sultana, S., Batool, A., & Akhtar, M 2023.) In our Pakistani society, people usually try to find humor in every aspect to avoid the harshness of the reality.

However, this type of attitude also impact the perspectives, ideologies and behavioral patterns in real life. Memes are typically used as a tool for social commentary, political satire, economic critique and portrayal of religious beliefs to raise community engagement in contemporary pakistani society. Memes can differ in meaning from one region of the world to other depending on sociocultural norms. Moreover, memes also highlight the social issue of the society by exploring the dark realities of every society in best possible way.

### 1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study held significance in the changing dynamics of political communication in Pakistan, particularly in the context of digital media propagation. With the immense use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and twitter the social media memes have shaped the opinions of people that traditional media cannot. By keenly examining the impact of memes on political narratives, this research adds to the contribution of ever-developing knowledge about how informal audience-centric and user-generated content influence public opinion and political engagement.

Firstly, the study was significant for the scholars, field-related experts, and researchers contributing in the field of political communication by providing them with relevant information of how culture within the digital spaces collides with already established theories such as framing theory, agenda-setting theory, and media effects. Memes are considered a refined and condensed form of information that offers a unique vision through which political messages are clarified, explained, and distributed among the masses. Understanding this process of political communication is crucial for the identification of the importance of meme culture in society and how the general public perceives it.

Secondly, it is crucial for policymakers and political actors. In a diverse, civilized country like Pakistan, it is very important for political actors to know how their messages are interpreted by the public, the interactions of a certain group of people from the society, and how public perception is highly influenced by viral content. How can complex and sometimes irrelevant messages be transformed into simpler ones by adding a visual element and a punch of laughter to infuse them into a certain targeted group of people in society? By knowing the power of memes, public representatives of specific political actors can shape a certain event and can better understand how narratives are being changed, twisted and manipulated in the digital spaces.

## 1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of research are following:

1. To analyze the nature of political memes, whether they are satire, criticism, humor, or propaganda of political memes being shared through Instagram.
2. To evaluate the narrative framing of certain events by political actors.
3. To identify ideological bias in political memes.
4. To investigate media consumption effects on ideologies, perceptions, political interests and discussions among young Instagram users.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the emergence of memes, political narratives shifted among people of all age groups. The effect of memes on political narratives has attracted increasingly scholarly attention in recent years. Memes are described as a crucial component of political communication that is transmitted rapidly across social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Different studies reveal that memes act as a tool of participation of the general public in forming narratives of a political nature in the country. From active participation of the audience in politics to forming opinions that matter, memes have played their best possible role. Memes can be of satire nature and can critique any social or political issues in society. As per experts, memes simplify highly complex political issues into simpler ones, making it easier for better public engagement. This type of effect aligns with framing theory, which explains how certain events, issues or happenings are framed to be perceived by the audience. The shift from old forms of media to multimedia, which is more versatile, enabled political actors to better understand the importance of informal communication channels in political engagement.

In Pakistan, memes are being regulated quickly on all social media platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok and Twitter without any inspection. However, recent political activities by Pakistani political actors such as Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif has impacted Pakistani political narratives

in so many different ways. Limor Shifman describes Internet memes as a group of digital items that share common characteristics of content, form, and stance, created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users (Memes in Digital Culture 41).

Outside the sphere of structure and persuasion, scholars are of the view that political preference and the method of infusion of memes in the minds of the general public also plays its role. The emotional selection theory and media effects reflect that memes not only disseminate due to information but also due to the fact that they are humorous, triggering

many soft and harsh realities of politics.

In the prevailing digital age, meme culture has become a very crucial part of political communication, describing how young people and political actors participate in and act when it comes to public affairs. Globally, it has effects on a vast scale, impacting voters' behavior, their choice of political actors and ideological bias. In the context of global elections, such as the 2016 and 2024 U.S. presidential election campaigns, memes formed a ubiquitous layer of discourse. Campaigns and policy makers converted candidates into meme icons, and on the other hand, user-generated content framed political narratives with humor, parody, and viral identity markers (Teen Vogue; The Sun 2024).

According to critics, memes have the ability to make issues seem like they're either right or wrong, make people more divided, and classify them by ignoring the grey areas. All of this makes it harder for decision-making power and people to agree and make informed decisions (Topoi 2024). Studies showed that from 2022 to 2024, showcasing how political memes convey objection. The results demonstrate that memes operate as a relevant system, affording the opportunity for marginalized populations that include youth and digital activists to engage in political liberty and public communication within a restrictive environment that usually avoids direct confrontation with censorship. By understanding the meaning behind the text, the research explains

how humor is used as a tool of protest and how memes become digital markers of collective identity and resistance in modern Pakistan (Social Sciences Studies, 2025).

## 2.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**RQ1.** What is the nature of political memes, and which category of political memes highly impacts political narratives?

**RQ2.** How narrative framing of events are done by political actors?

**RQ3.** How ideological bias in political memes can be identified?

**RQ4.** How media consumption effects on ideologies, perceptions, political interest can be evaluated among young Instagram users?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology we adopted was qualitative content analysis, semiotic analysis and multimodal communication of memes being shared on Instagram. A qualitative content analysis is a research method that is used to analyze and decode textual data like texts, images, or videos, mainly to identify patterns, themes, and concepts behind that data. Its about deeply analyzing the content to understand the underlying messages, context and significance. Preiser, R., Garcia, M. M., Hill, L., & Klein, L. (2021) say that qualitative methods of content analysis provide enough information about the sense-making and meaning creation of the language being used to represent various themes and concepts hidden under specific phrases. Additionally, Lyhne, Thisted, and Bjerrum (2025) showed that qualitative content analysis is specifically designed to interpret and explain the meaning of the problem that is under research to respond to the queries related to it.

All the above mentioned features made this method capable enough to be utilized in research. Since we were working with political terms being used by political actors to emotionally impact the narratives of the general public. In other words, qualitative content analysis allowed us to simplify the complex phrases and terms into easier ones by understanding the crust of political communication. Collectively, all the mentioned methodological studies referred that qualitative

content analysis is not just a descriptive tool but also act as a simplifies used to increase the impact of what is actually communicated by the political actors and how it is perceived by the general public.

This study used a qualitative research design to analyze the hidden meanings conveyed through memes related to social issues and practices for the multimodal critical discourse analysis of memes. Also, the multimodal analysis helped to justify how various forms of media such as texts and visuals, emphasize the meaning of each other and how these meanings are persuasive in a particular context. However, this study particularly focuses on memes that effect political narratives of general public. Our research methodology resonates with the khan (2024) who has used the same design for the mutimodal analysis of Pakistani memes related to politics.

Similarly, Saleem et al., (2022) emphasized the political memes created during the no-confidence movement in Pakistan. Their study identified political biases and unethical representations in memes.

## SAMPLING

The data collected for the study included different memes reflecting various aspects of Pakistani society. For this purpose, many memes were collected from all social media platforms such as instagram, facebook and tiktok. Later on, the selected memes were filtered to match the recent political events in the country also demonstrating the impact of those memes on political narratives of general public. Only memes relevant to sociocultural were selected and rest of them were discarded. Only the memes with macro image were selected, those who were containing both texts and visuals were shortlisted for the multi-modal analysis during the selection. The under consideration memes were found to reflect either social practices or criticize the dominant narratives of the authoritative institutions of Pakistan.

## SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

After data collection, the purposive sampling was done to perform qualitative content analysis. A sample size of 20 political memes were selected

from various perspectives. Each meme reflected the political perspectives, statements by political actors, and depiction of any political event in different ways. Most of them were selected based on following characteristics.

- Bilingual analysis.
- Humor-based communication.
- Cultural and social relevance.

On the basis of above mentioned characteristics, popular memes of the relevant era was selected. Every meme was analyzed focusing on visuals, texts and the type of language being used to highlight the impact of relevant event. The qualitative approach allowed the deeper study of meanings being communicated rather than statistical generalization.

### Results:

The results of the study after the qualitative content analysis was performed and it revealed that most of the political memes were used as a satire to mock on politicians, criticizing major political actors, political events using humor as a tool. Most of the memes strategically used to exaggerate traits of political leaders to construct political narratives. A significant number of memes were particularly focused on political figures than policies. The content was most of the time aligned with particular ideological positions, framing political opponents negatively while portraying preferred groups positively. This contributed to create echo chambers within the online spaces. In all of this, humor emerged as a dominative communicative strategy. Many memes from the internet referred to popular culture including films, celebrities and

viral formats of this kind. Most of the memes, that combined humor element of communication with strong political messages showed higher level of engagement when it came to likes, views, shares and reposts. Political actors usually do not consume memes but they gain popularity and be in public eye with it.

Through memes on social apps such as Instagram lead to leader construction. Most of this app is used by Gen-Z and they have different political perspectives depending on the type of content they are consuming. If they are exposed to positive narrative of a political meme then they have positive ideologies about that specific political actor which in further can affect voting behaviour. Repeated meme themes influenced which political issues gained attention (e.g., inflation, corruption). Frequent exposure to memes and normalized informal and humorous political discussion, shifting traditional communication norms. The analysis also revealed internal contradictions such as memes promoted both engagement and apathy. Also they served as tools for both resistance and propaganda. It also revealed that humor both challenged authority and undervalued serious issues.

### Discussion:

The detailed qualitative content analysis of the shortlisted memes is given below. However, these memes are confined to political actors and political memes referred to the Pakistani content.

### Visual Analysis:

For the visual analysis, following memes were taken as an example.



Figure 1: Refers to very recent (2024) political elections where one political party tried to blame on the “establishment” for being involved in government formation.



Figure 2: A political actor being preferred over the other on the basis of popularity among the general public.

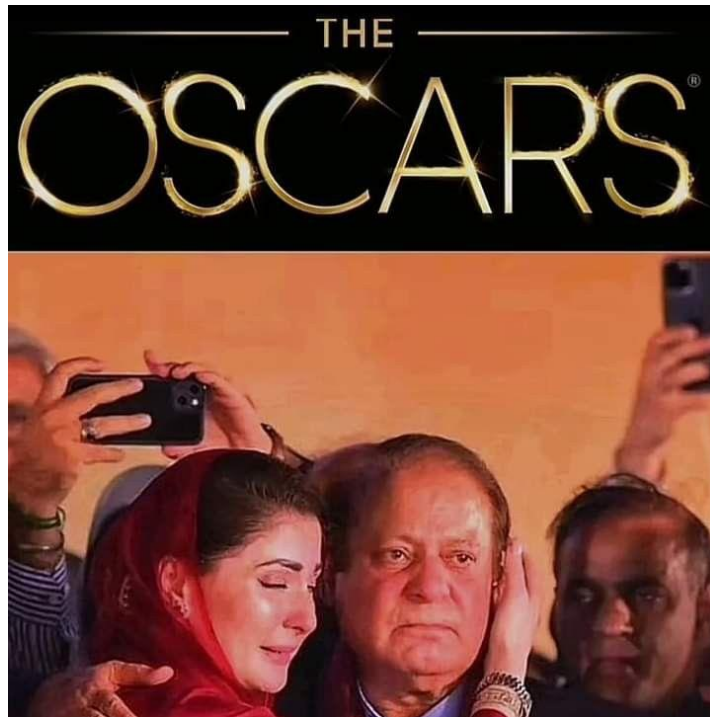


Figure 3: the figure depicts of metaphor being used for a specific political party.

**Social media analytics:**

This study uses qualitative content analysis to examine engagement metrics such as likes, reposts, and shares of political memes being shared on Instagram to assess their impact on political narratives.



Figure 4: Likes = 17.2k , Comments= 295, Reposts= 72



Figure 5: likes hidden, comments= 181, reposts= 1

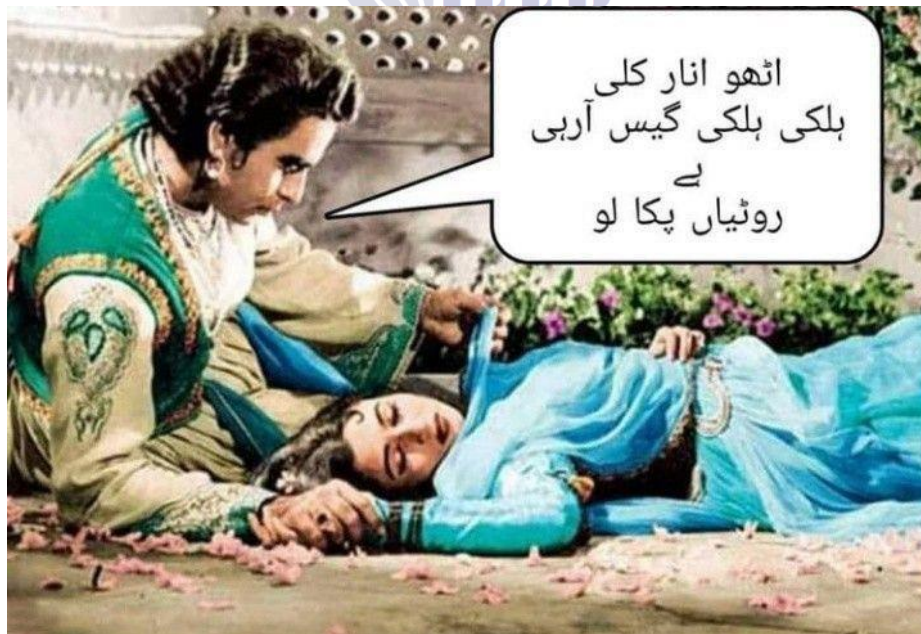


Figure 6: Refers to recent gas shortage in Pakistan



Figure 7: Refers to a political press conference

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- <https://pin.it/2gYZffaCT>