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A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL MEMES ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE RECENT PAKISTAN INDIA CONFLICT

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Abstract
This study conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of political memes circulating on social media (SM) in response to the recent Pakistan India conflict. The research objectives are, to examine how political memes function as tools of ideological reproduction; to identify the discursive strategies employed in constructing nationalistic narratives and enemy images and to explore the role of SM in shaping public discourse. The analysis is grounded in Fairclough's 3D Model and Teun van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive approach, providing a dual lens to investigate the interplay between discourse structures, social cognition and power. A purposive sample of viral memes from Facebook (FB,) Twitter (now X) and Instagram was selected as multi-modal focusing on both textual and visual elements as well as contextual interpretation. The findings reveal that political memes operate as dynamic instruments of soft propaganda, utilizing humor, intersexuality, and symbolic representation to reinforce binary oppositions and legitimize nationalist ideologies. However, some are state-sponsored narratives, counter-discourse and challenging dominant interpretations on the conflict. This study concludes that memes are not merely humorous content but are significant carriers of ideology, capable of shaping collective consciousness etc. Future research may also be conducted on cross-cultural meme circulation, audience reception, and heuristic influence in digital age.

INTRODUCTION

Internet memes have emerged as a common form of communication in social media. Nowadays, these are known for their rapid dissemination and viral nature, basically, these are used to convey humour and meaning. Memes are multi-modal in nature as these combines text, images, videos and other elements for creating communication from one perspective to other perspective. In yester years, there has been advancement in interest in researching humour and virality of memes on social media, highlighting dynamics of meme culture and its effects on online communities (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015; Yus, 2018; Mahfouz, 2021; Ali, 2023; Rasheed et al., 202; Arshad, Mehmood & Ahmad, 2025).

Esfidani's (2022) point of view that in current century (i.e., 21st century) things have rapidly growing changed sequel to the emergence of social media network (SMN). Susanto et al (2022) mention in their research study that social media (SM) is an online platform that encourages user-generated content and interpersonal communication between people, groups, and organizations in the whole World. According to Mills (2012) and Sia et al (2023), social media have facilitated the shift in communication from

broadcasting to social dialogues through networks of engaged users. The emergence of SM has changed the roles of users from content consumers to content creators. Online SM and communication have a stronger sense of community in the digital age, bridging disparate platforms to connect with new faces.

Now the question is here is that why people are using SM and its growing day by day, in this regard, Millennials mentions that as digital natives are drawn to social media because it can satisfy many of their needs. According to Kilian et al (2012) there are some reasons why people use media i.e., information, satisfying curiosity (feeling a sense of belonging and connection with family, friends, and society), personal identity and enhancing one's sense of self. Here, the most important thing regarding SMN is "humour," which seems to meet most, if not all, of the prerequisites. SM users are engaging with more entertaining content than ever before, which results in a virality effect where viewers turn to themselves by sharing the content. Hence, using internet memes; where social, humorous or political is a common way to make jokes.

Presently, SM plays a central role in shaping public discourse. Political memes short, symbolic, and highly shareable visual-textual forms have become powerful tools for shaping national narratives (Shifman, 2014). During the recent Pakistan-India conflict, these memes were widely used to express ideological stances, reinforce national identities, and portray the opposing nation as an enemy. CDA, particularly through the frameworks of Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2008), enables the deconstruction of how language and imagery in memes reflect and reproduce power dynamics.

Problem Statement

"The problem statement is a clear and concise summary of the research problem, typically contained within one paragraph; its function is to identify the concerned issue" (Ahmad, Farhat & Abbas, 2024). Despite the prevalence of political memes during the Pakistan-India conflict, there is limited research work is available so far through the lens of CDA as just this is very recent incident. Most existing research overlooks the ideological and discursive dimensions of memes as social and political tool. Therefore, this is the gap that by examining how memes function to legitimize dominant narratives, construct "us vs them" identities, and influence public perception during political tensions.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research study are as follows:

1. **To identify** the discursive and visual strategies used in memes to construct nationalist ideologies and enemy representations.
2. **To explore** how SM platforms contribute to the dissemination and normalization of conflict narratives through memes.
3. **To analyze** the role of memes in shaping public opinion and reinforcing or challenging dominant state narratives.

Significance of the Study

This study significantly contributes to the interdisciplinary field of CDA by demonstrating how political memes / funny memes on social media function as instruments of ideological reproduction and soft message during the Pakistan-India conflict. While memes are often dismissed as humorous or trivial, scholars like Shifman (2014) have emphasized their cultural and political relevance in digital communication. It provides a context specific analysis of South Asian political narratives, offering insights into how digital content influences national identity formation and public sentiment in conflict scenarios. Ultimately, this research urges both scholars and policymakers to view digital media content not merely as entertainment, but as a significant site of political messaging and ideological control.

Research Questions

1. What discursive and visual strategies are commonly used in memes to represent national identity and the "Other"?
2. In what ways do memes reinforce or resist official state information on social media?
3. How do these memes contribute to shaping public discourse and perceptions during political conflict?

Literature Review

Literature review is a written overview of major writings and other sources on a selected topic. Sources

covered in the review may include scholarly journal articles, books, and websites. The purpose of literature review is to gain an understanding of the existing research and debates relevant to a particular research topic (Rao et al., 2023; Sadaf et al., 2024; Maitlo et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2025; Yousaf et al., 2025). This study is deal with the theoretical frameworks of CDA, primarily drawing from the works of Fairclough and van Dijk. Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of discourse comprising textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice provides a comprehensive approach to examining how language both reflects and constructs social realities. This model is especially useful for analyzing the textual and visual elements of memes in relation to their broader sociopolitical context. Complementing this, van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive model emphasizes the role of mental representations, ideologies, and group-based knowledge structures in discourse production and interpretation. His focus on the interface between discourse and power structures is particularly relevant for understanding how memes construct in-group versus out-group identities during conflict.

In addition, this study draws on Shifman's (2014) cultural analysis of internet memes, which situates them as participatory texts that both mirror and shape public discourse. Shifman's framework helps in understanding memes as multimodal communicative acts with strong ideological functions. The research also intersects with visual discourse analysis, acknowledging that meaning in political memes is co-constructed through imagery, symbolism, and intertextual references (Machin & Mayr, 2012). These combined theoretical perspectives enable a nuanced exploration of how political memes during the Pakistan-India conflict operate as discursive tools that normalize propaganda, reinforce nationalist ideologies, and influence public sentiment in digital spaces.

The word meme was first used in an academic sense by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book The Selfish Gene (1976). Originally defined as something akin to the DNA of cultural transmission, the term, like the phenomena it describes, has evolved. Wiggins (2019) elaborates on the beauty of the term as a single simple symbol indicating the mechanism for cultural transmission, saying, Dawkins is to be applauded for contributing a social concept, the meme, to suggest a way to communicate about how cultures retain knowledge of their practices. Linguistically, the term accomplishes a serious and challenging feat: the Dawkinsian meme enables the conceptualization of concrete (songs, fashions, architecture, etc.) as well as deeply abstract (god, freedom, supernatural, etc.) ideational characteristics of expressions of a given culture (Wiggins 2019).

Our use of meme is in the non-material sense. The meme that conveys ideology is a mediated message with the potential to impart knowledge, beliefs, and practices so that they may be maintained within and shared between cultures. Wiggins (2019) helps us define internet memes as discourse. Wiggins is quick to point out that Dawkins' usage of the word is not adequate to define what people mean today when we speak of "memes." Wiggins explicates the concept by describing a sort of cultural genetic engineering where the previously "organic" processes of cultural transmission are hacked to spread select information and disinformation forcefully and widely with political, cultural, financial, or other goals in mind. Wiggins refers readers to Shifman (2013), whose book Memes in Digital Culture identifies three key "dimensions" of internet memes including content, form, and stance.

One of the most powerful aspects of memes is their potential to cross cultural and geographical divides. Laineste and Voolaid (2016) specifically looked at Estonian memes that often combined Russian language with local imagery in attempts to portray humor (p. 28). They note that, "[Memes] provide an entry point, sometimes even the first exposure to topical 'hot' and debated issues, mixing critical commentary with absurd metacomments. Memes can be political they do more than just criticise. They involve people" (Laineste and Voolaid 2016).

Although memes can be interpreted differently by viewers of different cultures with varying levels of access to the popular content being referenced, the potential for memes to convey meaning to mass audiences is real. Nieubuurt (2021) says that memes can "... harness the power of signs acculturating and reconfirming ideas of how the world really is." Mixing relatively easy to understand, humorous images with textual commentary meant to sway public opinion is

the hallmark of a meme used to wield, or at least reflect, rhetorical power (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016). It can be concluded from the previous problem statement that memes have various ideological assumptions that have been analyzed by visual semiotics and textual analysis such as the general opinion about the activity of the government and the problems that the society faces. The social cognition in the memes is between the government and the society. The meme maker is the medium among them to convey their real problems or what's happening through the memes. The social analysis in the memes is that the society has dominant power because the meme makers are a part of the society and also the meme makers have strategies that can make viewers get influenced by the discourse that the meme makers made.

Ethical Considerations

While this study focuses on the textual and visual analysis of political memes, ethical considerations were made regarding the selection of publicly available memes to avoid misrepresentation of individuals and groups.

Research Methodology

"The research methodology is the procedure which is used by the researchers to gather data for resolving problems of investigation and design of the research comprises of the whole procedure which is conducted research"(Ahmad, Farhat & Choudhary, 2022). This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in CDA) using a multimodal approach to examine the textual and visual elements of political memes. The research is interpretive in nature, aiming to uncover the ideological structures embedded in digital content related to the Pakistan-India conflict. As the study focuses on content rather than human subjects, there are no direct participants. However, the research considers the broader discourse communities engaging with these memes particularly users from Pakistan and India who actively produce, share, or respond to political memes on social media platforms. The data consists of a purposive sample of numerous political memes sourced from major social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Memes were selected based on their virality, relevance to the Pakistan-India conflict, and engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments). Screenshots and post metadata were archived for analysis. However, only most relevant memes are included for making this study more appropriate.

The analysis applies Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model focusing on textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural context combined with Teun van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive approach to link discourse with ideology and power structures. Visual elements were analyzed using principles from Machin and Mayr's (2012) multimodal discourse analysis, allowing for the examination of symbols, color schemes, and imagery in conjunction with textual content.

Data Analysis

Here is a complete analysis of the study and breakdowns have been clarified accordingly.



Figure 1

This image features a meme commentary on the India-Pakistan conflict, specifically focusing on the controversial remarks made by a man named Mohammad Qureshi. The text in the meme highlights Qureshi's past military service and his aggressive stance towards Pakistan, claiming, "We will destroy Pakistan completely." This direct and hostile rhetoric feeds into the nationalist narrative of historical animosities, presenting a stark "us vs. them" mentality.

The use of bold yellow text further amplifies the inflammatory statement, drawing attention to it in a sensationalized manner. The image pairing of Qureshi and his daughter, Colonel Sophia Qureshi, emphasizes a military legacy, positioning the family as symbols of pride and patriotism while also highlighting the link between personal and national identity.



Figure 2

This image uses humor and satire to highlight the contrast between national issues and personal grievances. The dialogue in the comic, where a military figure dismisses the seriousness of a situation by referencing Karachi's water shortage, trivializes a potentially critical moment. The use of social media (Twitter) further emphasizes the role of digital platforms in shaping public discourse through humor. The power dynamics are subtly critiqued, as the image reduces serious concerns like military duty to the mundane, showing how humor can both reflect and diminish the weight of real social issues.

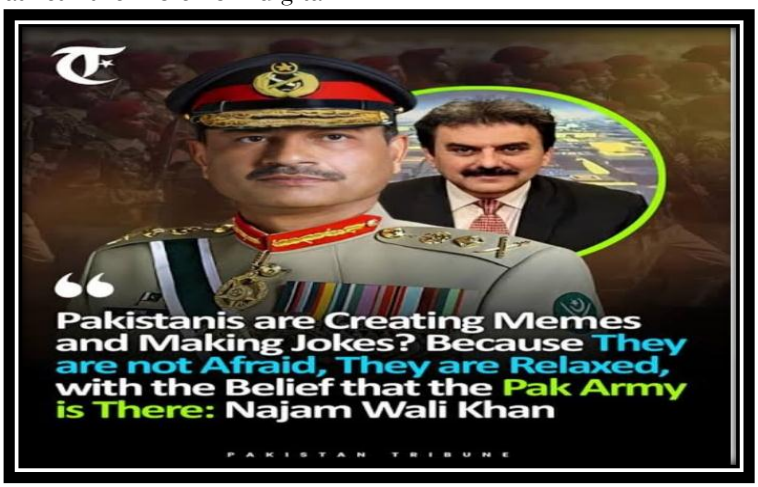


Figure 3

This image combines humor with national pride in the context of rising tensions between India and Pakistan. The caption quotes Najam Wali Khan, asserting that Pakistanis are relaxed and unafraid, creating memes because they have faith in the Pakistan Army's protection. This reinforces the idea that humor is a coping mechanism during crises and portrays a sense of security among Pakistanis, relying on the military's strength. The military figure's image is paired with Najam Wali Khan's to highlight the connection between national security and public confidence, while also suggesting that memes (a symbol of lightheartedness) reflect a deeper belief in military protection. This discourse glorifies the army while minimizing the seriousness of external threats, using humor as a way to convey resilience and national unity in the face of external pressure.



Figure 4

This meme engages with the Indus Water Treaty through a combination of satire and political commentary. Miss Khawaja's humorous tweet about managing household water is juxtaposed with Zaira Nizaam's serious observation regarding the treaty's potential impact on Pakistan. The contrast highlights how social media discourse often frames sensitive political issues through humor, enabling users to both trivialize and critically reflect on matters of national concern. In this way, satire functions as a discursive strategy that reshapes public understanding of water disputes and cross-border tensions.



Figure 5

This image presents a humorous and sarcastic representation of the ongoing India-Pakistan meme war, using visuals and memes to satirize the tension between the two countries. The image on the left shows Indian Prime Minister Modi in a prayer pose, while the text "Meme War" in large letters overpowers the rest of the image, emphasizing the lighthearted nature of the discourse. On the right, the meme plays on the water issue, with a sarcastic comment about India's water being used in a way that dehumanizes the situation, comparing it to "soap running in eyes."



Figure 6

The text from Khawaja Asif (Defence Minister of Pakistan) highlights India's allegations regarding Pakistan's involvement in the Pahalgam incident. This rhetoric aligns with the "us vs them" discourse, where Pakistan's defensive stance is positioned as a response to external accusations. The image reflects Pakistan's counter-narrative, reinforcing national identity and positioning Pakistan as a victim of unjust claims, a common strategy in nationalist memes.



Figure 7

The image of Narendra Modi (Prime Minister of India), with humorous undertones, critiques India's stance in the conflict. The juxtaposition of Modi's serious image with absurd humor plays into the strategic use of humor in memes to challenge authority figures. This serves to satirize the opponent's narrative while simultaneously asserting a counter-narrative, illustrating how memes in the article serve as both ideological tools and forms of resistance.

This study applies Norman Fairclough's (1989) 3D model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (1998) to analyze political memes circulating during the Pakistan-India conflict. Fairclough's model is used in three distinct dimensions: textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. In the first dimension, the textual analysis examines both the visual and written components of the memes, identifying how they use humor, intertextuality, and symbolism to construct national identities and portray adversaries. The second dimension, discourse practice, looks at how these memes spread and function on social media platforms, revealing how they reflect and influence broader social dynamics. The final dimension, sociocultural practice, explores the role of memes in shaping collective consciousness and reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives within the context of the conflict.

In parallel, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (1998) is used to understand the mental representations and ideologies embedded in the memes. These digital artifacts serve as ideological instruments, creating in-group versus out-group identities and influencing how the public perceives the conflict. The analysis emphasizes that memes are not just humorous content but play a significant role in shaping national identity and public opinion. By using these frameworks, the study shows how memes in this digital age function as tools for propaganda and resistance, highlighting the power dynamics involved and their impact on national discourses.

Conclusion

This study has explored the powerful role of political memes on social media during the Pakistan-India conflict, demonstrating how these digital artifacts function as tools for ideological reproduction and propaganda. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it has been shown that memes are not merely humorous content but significant carriers of political messages that reinforce nationalist ideologies, construct "us vs them" identities, and manipulate public perceptions. The memes analyzed, including those featuring Khawaja Asif's statements and satirical representations, emphasize the complex interplay between humor, visual symbolism, and national discourse.

The memes serve as both instruments of hegemonic reinforcement and resistance, with some reflecting state-sponsored narratives while others challenge dominant interpretations. The analysis of the images reveals the ways in which humor, intersexuality, and symbolism are used to shape and diffuse political messaging in a highly engaging and shareable format. These findings highlight the power of memes to influence public opinion, escalate tensions, and normalize geopolitical conflicts through soft propaganda.

Ultimately, this research examines the need to view political memes as serious tools for shaping discourse in conflict zones. They act as a mirror to public sentiment, reflecting not just political viewpoints but also the cultural and social dynamics at play. In the case of the Pakistan-India conflict, memes have proven to be effective in both defending national identities and attacking perceived enemies, illustrating the broader implications of digital media in contemporary political communication. Future studies should further investigate the reception of these memes and their impact on international relations and peace building efforts.

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