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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Beyond Laughter: Unpacking Political Discourse in Pakistan through the Lens of Facebook Political Memes**

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**ABSTRACT**

Political memes play a vital role in contributing to contemporary politics and in Pakistan; several political memes can be seen on social networking sites every day. In addition, the perception of public participation in politics has expanded in recent years and now, people especially youth prefer to use social media to share their political thoughts. Based on this observation, this research examines the recurring themes found within political memes and the role of memes in initiating political discourse. Thematic analysis has been conducted in this study and three Facebook pages having high and medium-range followers have been filtered out by applying keywords such as 'political memes', 'political memes in Pakistan', and 'top political meme pages in Pakistan'. Over all 76 political memes have been extracted from these pages and analyzed based on their link to political leaders and political personalities. Memes related to the top three political parties and their leaders including Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) have been examined. The study concludes that memes have the potential to propagate political ideologies among social media users. They are a vital source of political participation and depict the interest of people in different political and national issues. For future research, pictorial elements used in a meme such as the position of the texts, image, camera angle, and other aspects can be analyzed as well to study political memes more deeply.

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**KEYWORDS** Facebook, Pakistan, Political Memes, Political Participation, Political Parties, Political Personalities

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**Introduction**

The mainstream media is not only the sole creator of the content at present due to the advancement of technology and the emergence of digital media. The new media has gained so much popularity as it is more interactive than broadcast media and incorporates two-way communication. In digital media, social networking sites are considered an important source to interact with people and change the dynamics of content creation. These sites enable people to contribute to the discourse by participating in online activities (Huntington, 2017).

Another important aspect of content creation in the digital world is that disseminating information or content to a wider audience is easier compared to when there was no Internet. This quick dissemination of content is known as 'going viral' in the world of Web 2.0. Anonymous or little-known sources usually create the content but have the potential to be widely consumed by Internet users (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). The viral media content present on social networking sites consists of sharing photos, links for videos, posting reviews, and sending content popularly known as 'memes' (Chandler, 2008). This particular research has focused on one of the viral contents called

'memes' as they are present on all social networking sites and one of the most widely shared online content on these platforms.

Richard Dawkins coined the term, 'meme' for the first time and described it as 'small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation' (Shifman, 2014, p.2). Concerning 'internet meme', a popular concept in the case of new media, it refers to user-generated online content that affects its viewers (Huntington, 2017). Internet memes also refer to jokes, videos, photos, and rumors passed on from one person to another (Shifman, 2014). According to Chandler (2008), internet memes have the potential to shift social mindsets and transform ideological content in a short period.

Memes do not only add humor to everyday life but it is also a mode of public participation and serve as a tool of contemporary politics in the digital world (Burroughs, 2013). From this statement, it can be assumed that memes have the potential to initiate a political discourse and are an important tool for public participation. Shifman (2014) also supported this idea in his book, *Memes in Digital Culture*, by stating that, political memes are framed humorously or they are deadly serious. Traditional political studies focus on the usual public participation activities such as joining a political party or voting for a specific leader. However, the perception of public participation in politics has expanded in recent years. Now, people prefer to comment on social media political pages or political blogs and post jokes about a political party or politician (Fareed, et. al. 2019; Shifman, 2014).

In Pakistan, several political memes can be seen on social networking sites every day. It is undoubtedly not wrong to say that people create new political memes regularly and they get viral on the Internet every week. 'Main Inn Ko Rulaon ga' (I will make them cry), 'Go Nawaz Go', 'Mujhay Kiun Nikala' (Why kicked me out?), and 'Tabdeeli aa Nahi Rhi Tabdeeli aa Gai Hai' (The change is not coming, it has come) are among the few examples of political memes in Pakistan. Keeping in view the popularity of memes among social media users and the importance of political memes in contemporary politics, this research examines the recurring themes found within political memes and how memes initiate a political discourse.

Various studies have been conducted on political memes in which researchers analyzed memes as a tool for political engagement, visual rhetoric, reshaping public opinion, and content of the memes. However, these studies have been conducted outside Pakistan. Thousands of pages are available on Facebook that create or share political memes and this is how the meme culture spread. However, no sufficient studies have been conducted on the themes of political memes and their role in initiating a political discourse. Therefore, this research focuses on covering these research gaps.

## Literature Review

A meme is defined as a unit of culture that passes from one person to another by imitation (Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 1999). David Gaunhlett (2011) did not use the word, 'meme' in his book, *Making is Connecting*. However, he defines a term that is more suitable for trolling. Gaunhlett (2011) writes;

"Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy (Gaunhlett, 2011, p.76)."

Heidi E. Huntington (2017), a researcher, who worked on memes as a source of visual rhetoric, shared that memes are filled with visual and intertextual content, which means that multiple meanings, events, and texts can be related to memes. Riemensperger (2018) described memes as natural vehicles because according to the researcher, memes have the potential to construct communities. People invest their time in creating memes and their remixes. It does not only define themselves but the overall community to which they belong.

The literature available on memes as a source of visual communication focuses on the aspects of memes combined to develop a new political discourse. Huntington (2017) stated that pop culture is mostly mixed up with politics and as a result, discourses of memes have developed which digital media users further consume for their entertainment purposes. According to Johann (2022), political memes are tools to express the political sentiments of people on social media platforms and this form of meme is a popular format on the internet used by people to express their opinions. Beskow et al., (2020) also examined the overall development of political memes. Internet memes have now become a significant artifact of the digital era after combining humor with cultural phenomena. Dawkins (1976) described in his book that memes evolve through a process of mutation and ultimately behave like cultural genes.

Regarding Pakistan, Qazi et al., (2022) conducted research in which political personalities of Pakistan have been analyzed through the technique of visual framing. Political memes present on Facebook have been selected for this purpose and by examining the camera angles, researchers portrayed different concepts such as sarcasm, emotions, personal attacks, and the other variables. The study concluded that framing has undoubtedly a crucial role in the making of memes regarding political personalities.

Other researchers also explored the genre of political memes. For example, Theisen et al., (2021) argued in their work that internet memes have become a popular tool of communication to penetrate political ideologies among people during the past decade. The core purpose of memes was initially to create humor for social media users but now it is influencing the perception of current events in the entire world. Talking about political satire, Suherman (2020) analyzed political memes in that reference. On social media, memes have now been used as political satire because, in this way, we can target a greater number of people.

To check the effectiveness of political memes as a new form of political participation, Kasirye (2019) conducted research in which the findings revealed that there is a significant impact of political memes on public participation in politics. On one hand, internet memes are used to create humor or become a tool for political participation but on the other hand, it has also become a source of political weapon. Ndoen (2018) has conducted a study in this regard that examined Instagram memes and how humor turns into a political weapon. The study reveals that political fights also occur on social media at present. Memes are not only produced during the elections. The production of memes continues even after the elections because it has become a tool for criticizing the government or forming public opinion.

Penney (2018) conducted research to highlight the political expression of American youth through humor. Memes have been selected in this regard, as they create online humor and it is a popular source of showing citizen empowerment. A wide range of emotions or phenomena for sharing political memes has been identified in this research including solidarity, reinforcing beliefs, communal identities, and criticizing political influence.

From the above studies, it can be analyzed that political memes play a significant role in contemporary politics because besides creating humor, these memes are an important source for reaching youth and knowing their political opinions. It can be noticed that only one study has been conducted in the context of Pakistan but at the same time, that particular study analyzed memes differently. Therefore, this research focuses on extracting themes from political memes uploaded on Facebook pages and relatable with the political parties and political personalities.

### **Material and Methods**

For this research, the qualitative research method has been used. This research style helps in exploring and providing a deeper insight into real-world problems. Numerical data has not been selected in this type of research approach and researchers prefer to get information by asking about the experiences of the participants, perceptions, and behaviors. Various methods for data collection have been used under the qualitative research approach including interviews, focus group discussions, thematic analysis, etc.

### **Thematic Analysis**

In this research, thematic analysis has been used to study the underlying themes of political memes and their role in initiating political discourse. For this purpose, three Facebook meme pages have been selected based on high and medium-range followers. Political memes uploaded by these pages from June 2022 to June 2023 have been selected. The analysis has been done on:

- Memes portraying a particular political party.
- Memes portraying a particular politician.
- Memes showing political issues or political developments.

### **Universe**

All the political memes of political personalities of Pakistan are shared on Facebook meme pages.

### **Population**

Political memes of Pakistan's political personalities are shared on the top three Facebook meme pages selected based on the number of followers.

### **Sample**

The most widely shared image-based political memes of 2022-2023 from June 2022 to June 2023 on selected Facebook memes pages.

### **Unit of Sample**

A single image-based political meme has been taken as the unit of sample for the study.

### **Categories for the Thematic Analysis**

**Personal Attack:** Concerning this research, personal attack refers to the use of humor through memes in a way that makes a person feel inferior or degrades an individual due to their looks, personality, traits, or personal affiliations. **Satire:** In this research, satire refers to exposing or ridiculing a person, institution, or group through parody, criticism, caricature, or writing.

**Incompetent Leadership:** It refers to a type of humor that highlights the incapability of an individual in a way that they fail to deliver valuable information, lack knowledge, and do not have the potential to find the solution to real problems.

**Emotions:** Referring to this study, emotions are coded as visuals that show sarcasm, happiness, hope, and humor.

**Public Concern:** Public concerns have been coded as those issues that are important for the public and development of the country such as necessities of life (water, electricity, and gas), transportation, job opportunities, etc.

## Results and Discussion

For the thematic analysis, three Facebook pages with high and medium-range followers have been selected. Keywords such as 'political memes', 'political memes in Pakistan', and 'top political meme pages in Pakistan' have been used to filter out the pages. The shortlisted pages after applying the keywords include 'Thugs of Pakistan', 'Pakistan Memes Masti', and 'Memes Walay Baba'. According to statistics of December 2023, 'Thugs of Pakistan' has approximately three lacs and thirty-six thousand followers, 'Pakistan Memes Masti' has one lac and eight thousand followers, and 'Memes Walay Baba' has around thirty-eight thousand followers on Facebook. To examine political memes shared on these pages, data uploaded from June 2022 to June 2023 has been selected. However, it has been noticed as well that these pages do not only upload political memes. They also share other categories of memes along with political memes but this study also only selected the political memes.

### Categories of Memes shared on the Facebook pages (June 2022 to June 2023).

#### Thugs of Pakistan

'Thugs of Pakistan' has approximately three lacs and thirty-six thousand followers on its Facebook page. The account is also present on Instagram and YouTube with the same title. However, variation in terms of uploading content across three platforms can be noticed. For example, on its YouTube channel, the creator mostly uploads reaction videos on many topics such as cricket matches and vlogs uploaded by other creators on YouTube. On Instagram, the creator mostly uploads memes and reels to create humor and fun. Memes uploaded on Facebook pages can be seen on the Instagram page as well. On the Facebook page, the creator shares funny tweets, cricket memes, reels, political memes, etc. The page has uploaded more than 250 memes and tweets from June 2022 to June 2023. The popular genre of these posts is satire and humor. Among these 250 memes, 25 posts fall in the category of political memes.

#### Pakistan Meme Masti

The second page selected for this research is 'Pakistan Meme Masti'. In the title of the page, 'Masti' is an Urdu word that means fun. The creator has not made a YouTube channel with the same name but has an Instagram account on which the same content has been uploaded as Facebook. The page has uploaded approximately 40 posts based on memes and tweets from June 2022 to June 2023 among which there were seven political memes.

#### Memes Walay Baba

The third page selected for this research is 'Memes Walay Baba' and the last two words in the title are in the Urdu language. The word, 'Baba' refers to a nobleman in the

context of its literal meanings. The creator of this page has an Instagram account but does not own a YouTube channel. Reels, funny tweets, and various categories of memes have been uploaded on its Facebook page, including political memes. The page has uploaded approximately 850 posts in the duration of one year from June 2022 to June 2023 among which, 46 posts were based on political memes.

### Political Parties and Personalities Highlighted in Political Memes.

Overall, 76 political memes have been filtered out from the three Facebook pages having top followers in their respective categories. From June 2022 to June 2023, these pages shared around 1140 posts based on memes and funny tweets among which the ratio of political memes was approximately 7%. Following is the table that shows the stats of the political memes related to political personalities.

**Table 1**  
**Political Memes about Political Personalities**

Serial no.	Leader's Name	Total No. of Memes
1.	Imran Khan	16
2.	Nawaz Sharif	14
3.	Shahbaz Sharif	10
4.	Bilawal Bhutto Zardari	1
5.	Asif Ali Zardari	1
6.	Maryam Nawaz	8
7.	Others	16

Table 1 describes the total number of memes shared by the Facebook pages related to different political personalities of Pakistan from June 2022 to June 2023. Among 76 memes, 16 memes were related to Imran Khan from PTI, 14 memes were about Nawaz Sharif from PMLN, 10 memes were about Shahbaz Sharif from PMLN, eight memes were related to Maryam Nawaz from PMLN, and one each meme was based on Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Asif Ali Zardari from PPP. The other 16 memes fall in the category of other memes related to Ishaq Dar, Ahsan Iqbal, Fazal-Ur-Rehman, Usman Buzdaar, Mifta Ismail, Hamza Shahbaz, Faisal Vawda, and Fayaz-Ul-Hassan Chohan. Based on the stats, the table depicts that the highest number of memes were made about Imran Khan followed by Nawaz Sharif. However, it is important to examine in which theme or categories these personalities were portrayed in memes. The categories designed for this purpose are personal attack, satire, incompetent leadership, emotions, and public concern. Talking about the number of memes made against each of them related to political personalities and political parties, the two tables are as follows;

**Table 2**  
**Political Personalities and Themes**

Serial No.	Political Personality	Personal Attack	Satire	Incompetent Leadership	Emotion	Public Concern	Total
1.	Imran Khan (PTI)	1 (4.76%)	2 (20%)	3 (27%)	8 (89%)		14 (26.4%)
2.	Nawaz Sharif (PMLN)	6 (28.5%)	4 (40%)	4 (36.3%)			14 (26.4%)
3.	Shahbaz Sharif (PMLN)	6 (28.5%)	4 (40%)	2 (18.18%)	1 (11%)	2 (100%)	15 (28.3%)
4.	Maryam Nawaz (PMLN)	8 (38%)		1 (9%)			9 (16.9%)
5.	Bilawal Bhutto (PPP)			1 (9%)			1 (1.88%)

Total	21	10	11	9	2	53 (100%)
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Table 2 is based on a cross-tabulation that is made to draw a relation between five party leaders from PTI, PMLN, and PPPP, and the proposed categories. It shows that in the category of personal attack, the highest number of memes were made on Maryam Nawaz from PMLN. In the second category of the table, which is satire, an equal number of the highest memes have been uploaded on Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif from PMLN. Regarding incompetent leadership, the highest number of memes were made on Nawaz Sharif from PMLN. The highest number of memes were shared about Imran Khan from PTI in the fourth category, which is emotions whereas in the last category of the table, which is public concern, memes were made on Shahbaz Sharif from PMLN.

Table 3  
Political Parties and the Themes

Serial No.	Political Party	Personal Attack	Satire	Incompetent Leadership	Emotions	Public Concern	Total
1.	PTI	1 (4%)	2 (9%)		13 (93%)		16 (18.6%)
2.	PMLN	24 (88%)	11 (50%)	15 (83%)		4 (80%)	54 (62.7%)
3.	PPPP	1 (4%)	8 (36%)	3 (17%)		1 (20%)	13 (15%)
4.	Others	1 (4%)	1 (5%)		1 (7%)		3 (3.48%)
	Total	27	22	18	14	5	86 (100%)

Table 3 shows a cross-tabulation regarding political parties and defined themes. Three leading political parties of Pakistan, PTI, PMLN, and PPPP have been analyzed in this table, and the memes that do not relate to these parties have been treated separately. Talking about the first theme, 'personal attack', 88% were made on PMLN, which is higher than PTI and PPPP. In the category of satire, 50% of the memes were made on PMLN, and the rest were made on other political parties. In the categories of incompetent leadership and public concern, the highest number of memes were made on PMLN with a ratio of 83% and 80% respectively. PTI has scored the highest percentage in the category of emotions, which is 93%.

## Discussion

The purpose of the research was to examine the role of political memes in initiating political discourse among the social media users of Pakistan, analyze the visual framing techniques used in political memes, and examine the recurring themes found within political memes. From the thematic analysis, it can be examined that the highest number of memes in the category of personal attacks, incompetent leadership, satire, and public concern were made on PMLN whereas in the category of emotional attachment, the highest number of memes were made on PTI. Some examples of the textual memes are as follows;

- *Hina baat suno, aate hoye mere aur Humza ke liye Surf leti ana.* (Hina! Listen to me. Bring surf for Humza and me.)

In this meme, Maryam Nawaz from PMLN has been personally targeted.

- *Mujhe tou muft mein koi apna bukhaar bhi na de.* (No one will give me his/her fever for free.)

In this meme, Nawaz Sharif from PMLN has been personally targeted.

- *Aunty gormint ne sahi kaha tha jo bhi kaha tha #ImportedGovernment* (Whatever, 'Aunty Government' said was correct.)

In this meme, the Pakistan Democratic Movement popularly known as PDM in Pakistan's politics has been targeted in a satirical manner. This alliance was formed between the members of PMLN, PPPP, and JUI.

- *Mulzim driving seat pr, moojada soorat-e-haal ki behtareen aqaasi* (The culprit is in the driving seat; A true representation of the ongoing situation in the country.)
- *Last semester k 3 subjects main F Grade leny k bd.*

*Image text: Samjh nahi aarhi paisay kahan se aaen gy. Shahbaz Sharif.* (I don't understand where the money will come from.)

This meme was made about incompetent leadership and Shahbaz Sharif from PMLN has been targeted.

- *PPP election jeetny py Karachi k logoon ka shukriya ada krty huay; Karachi k log jin hon ny inhy vote hi nai diya* (PPP, thanking the people of Karachi on giving vote to them; people of Karachi who did not vote for them.)
- *All insafians must donate to khan sb bcz 'khan ne bola krny ka to krny ka.* (All PTI members are ready to donate because Mr. Khan ask them to do it.)

This meme was made on PTI and it highlights that party members are ready to give donations on the call of their leader, Imran Khan. Besides the textual memes, some widely shared memes present on Facebook pages have pictures in common. A few examples of such memes are as follows;



Figure 1 A meme made on Nawaz Sharif

Figure no.1 is based on the image of Nawaz Sharif while having a meal. It was taken from a video clip and the editor cut the image into different parts. The map of Pakistan is placed instead of the bites on each image, which tries to depict that the person has eaten the whole country.





Figure 2 A meme made on Imran Khan

The format of Figure No. 2 was also popular across all selected Facebook pages. The meme creators took an image from a Pakistan song sung by a singer named Imran Khan and compared it with the situation of political leader, Imran Khan. The image tries to show sympathy with Imran Khan when his party members left him.

To explain the visual framing technique used in these political memes, the framing theory given by Goffman in the 1970s is quite relevant. The theory explains, “which postulated that the context and organization of messages affect audiences’ subsequent thoughts and actions about those messages” (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011; p. 49). Another principle of framing views this approach as “a process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007). This theory applies to media and its approach to framing specific events (Fahmy, 2010). However, it can be relatable to memes as well, because social media users do haphazardly post images on social networking sites. Rather, they upload or share those posts that they like or want to show to others.

Social media users also use photo editors and similar tools to visually frame their news feed content. Internet memes can be ideally explained in the light of framing theory. Almost all types of memes use some form of visual-verbal framing. Visual framing functions similarly to verbal framing in which the image generators select images that are most important before transmitting those images to audiences.

## Conclusion

To sum up the entire discussion, it can be concluded that both visual and textual political memes have been shared on Facebook pages. The core purpose of these memes is to create humor but at the same time, they have the potential to propagate political ideologies among social media users. Studies have explained that memes play a major role in contemporary politics because, in the entire world, young people are very active on social media. Therefore, memes are the source of initiating political discourse and highlight communal identities. They are also a great source of political participation because, in this way, we can find out the popularity of political personalities, inclination towards political parties, and interest of people in different issues that ultimately affect voting behavior in general elections.

**Recommendations**

As far as the limitations of the study are concerned, it only selected three Facebook pages and only five themes could be examined in the case of political memes. These limitations can be addressed in future researches. In future studies, more themes can be developed and political memes can be examined in the light of those themes. Also, pictorial elements used in a meme such as the position of the texts, image, camera angle, and other aspects can be analyzed as well to study political memes from a different perspective.

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