

A SOCIO-COGNITIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA MEMES IN POLITICAL DOMAIN

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Original Article

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Abstract

For ages, humour has been used as a tool against oppression. Social media memes have gained importance with the advent of technology. Memes are a form of communication that uses humour and satire to spread information. People give their views about political leaders in a satirical manner. The study aims to show how memes portray Pakistani leaders. This study also shows how memes manipulate the young generation's political mindset. Sixteen memes are selected randomly from Tweeter and Instagram as samples for this study (probability sampling), and the technique used for this sampling is simple random. These memes show how people see political leaders and how memes change the mindset of people about them (political leaders). The research methodology adopted for this study is qualitative.

Keywords: Social media memes; political satire; humour and satire; manipulation; qualitative method; probability sampling

Introduction

In his book "The Selfish Gene," Richard Dawkins, while discussing about genetics, he coined the term "memes." (1976). The term meme is derived from a Greek word 'mimeme, meaning 'to imitate' (Dawkins, 1989). After that, people grew up with this idea in no time. The phrase "Internet Meme" became more popular with the development of the internet and digital technology. An internet meme is a part of culture that spreads online and gains influence, typically a joke (Buchel, 2012 and Dawkins, 1989). Memes on the internet are regarded as a means of promotion and projection that can quickly reach a larger audience. Memes have been around since the time that emoticons were invented. The first emoji used in digital communication was Scott E. Fahlman's (1982) sideways smiley face made from punctuation marks. Fahlman said that emoticons were necessary for online communication because they helped people understand humour or sarcasm.

Political discourse has relied heavily on memes. Memes are an important part of political satire in Pakistan. The hashtags "no-confidence motion," "Imported hakoomat na manzoor," and "Azadi march" are among the most recent viral memes. After the removal of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, these memes began to circulate. The current political situation is depicted in these memes. Memes portray the actions of the leaders of all parties in a very satirical way. Pakistani people are funny with rich sense of humour and can make fun of serious situations. *The Khabaristan Times* quoted this line to explain the sense of humour of Pakistani people. "They do not make

jokes just for the sake of laugh; they are actually trying to prove a point, even if it might get a little dark at times”.

Supporters of different political parties have embraced these meme-based perspectives. Our research aims to demonstrate how political leaders in Pakistan are portrayed in memes and how social media memes influence politics.

Scope and Significance of the Study

Although the term "meme" first appeared in the 1970s, it is now commonly regarded as an amusing or interesting phenomenon widely distributed on the internet. "Memes" were originally thought of as units of cultural transmission and could be summarized as ideas that catch on and pass between people within culture (Dawkins, 1989). You can laugh at memes. Memes can frighten you. They can serve as harmless entertainment or are designed to spread false information. The latter takes advantage of human frailty and can rapidly disseminate false information online. The study's significance lies in demonstrating how memes aid in information transmission. The present study also explores how memes play a role in influencing young people's political attitudes.

The objectives of this research are to:

1. To know about multi-layered meanings of memes.
2. know how they act as a way of getting information
3. To analyze the diplomacy of power and resistance with memes in portraying the political leaders.
4. To know how memes act as a factor to manipulate the political mindset of the young generation.

Limitations and Delimitation

This study is based only on memes collected from Instagram and Twitter. Other social media networks like Facebook are not part of the study. Not only do memes have multi-layered meanings and spread information, but they also spread misinformation among people. This study does not focus on how memes spread misinformation. Instead, it focuses on how they act as a way of getting information.

Research Questions

This study includes following research questions:

1. How do memes present multi-layered meanings?
2. How do memes act as a way of getting information?
3. How do memes portray political leaders in Pakistan?
4. How memes act as a factor to manipulate the political mindset of the young generation?

Literature Review

While most people understand a meme when they see one, asking someone for a definition of meme is likely going to be much more challenging. Even with huge popularity of memes, not many people know what a meme is or where the term came from (Iloh, 2021). What causes memes particularly difficult to define is the vagueness of the term "meme" relative to its prevalence. The term "meme" dates back to Richard Dawkins' 1976 article (the selfish Gene). Dawkins' "meme" was intended to imitate the term Gene by comparing with it, reflecting the movement and

spreading of genes (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins explains a meme as “a entity to transmit culture or simply an imitation” (2006, p. 192).”

According to recent studies, the meanings of memes are not universal, but different people can interpret memes differently based on their historical associations. As globalization has affected the world, people have mixed the terms entertainment and politics, so memes have become a source of fun and spitting facts. Social groups present their cultural values through political interests (Hall, 1993). The successful communication of messages or ideas by memes is mostly effective when one has some background knowledge of the meme. Such contextual information is understandable to those accustomed to Pakistan's historical or cultural context. This comprehension is somehow centred around power differences within the society. Some typical clues in the meme cause the onlookers to perceive possible explanations for interpretation of the meme. A meme is just like a canvas full of colors. They are always free to have as much interpretations as possible for different kind of onlookers. Creators have the power to create anything and play with the perceptions of their audience (Hodge, & Kress, 1997). The specific structure of picture and some words in a meme represents the informative material, eminence as well as the formulation of the ideas presented within. Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2014, p. 152) asserted by defining memes as ‘an illustration of an idea with “societal command” ’ that are inclined to go ‘viral’ because of the economy of language and crispiness of that specific idea. Often the trustable tenets in the social media are represented as social networking sites (SNS) that usually utilize the foundation built up by the ‘Uses and Gratification Theory.’ SNS put forward the indulgence in analytical, emotional and social demands (Dunne et al., 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Socio-cognitive model of van Dijk (1989, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2002 & 2006) is opted for this research. According to this model context and social cognition is the most troubling aspect in Critical Discourse Analysis. Being a significant component of critical discourse analysis, social cognition permits the researchers to analyze the social, cultural and political perspective critically for a better interpretation of the text (van Dijk, 1998 & 2006). Discursive discourse practices or communicative events are multiplex categories in Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, necessitating a shift from linguistic and syntactical analysis to broader categories like macrostructures in which a particular discourse practice takes place (van Dijk, 1998 & 2006). The primary level analysis of linguistic elements is followed by consideration of the broader social and political context in this study, which employs the same critical perspective. The term “cognition,” which can be defined as the collection of ideologies, faith, norms, goals, and abstract images of societal structures and intellectual processes, is an essential factor of the socio-cognitive model (Sheyholislami, 2001) that units up a specific discourse exercise and it does no longer consist of non-public and social entities.

Society, which does not include all established and regional macrostructures, governmental affairs, collective attributes, and collective association, is an additional crucial component of the socio-cognitive model which are significant in terms of analysis. Now, it is possible to say that the socio-cognitive model connects discourse analysis to linguistic and social attitudes. This term takes a similar attitude because political discourse is analyzed from both linguistic and political attitudes. According to van Dijk, discourse analysis is the analysis of ideas and beliefs because it bridges the gap between words and community, and this ideology must be analyzed on the bases of these levels (1998):

1. Examining the discourse's context: the social, political, or historical context of a conflict and the main players in it
2. It is necessary to identify positive and negative views about Us vs Them for the analysis of groups, power, dynamics and social friction.

Research Methodology

A compilation of sixteen memes uploaded following the no-confidence motion is selected for this study, along with specific images and text. The selected memes have been discussed and analyzed in this paper. The popular Twitter and Instagram pages and profiles served as the basis for the selection, each with over one million followers. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model served as a basis for the analysis.

The sample of memes for this study is collected randomly, that is simple random sampling (type of probability sampling). The qualitative research method is adopted for this study. The researcher could describe the reality behind the phenomena correlated with analyzing the meme's meaning if they used a qualitative method.

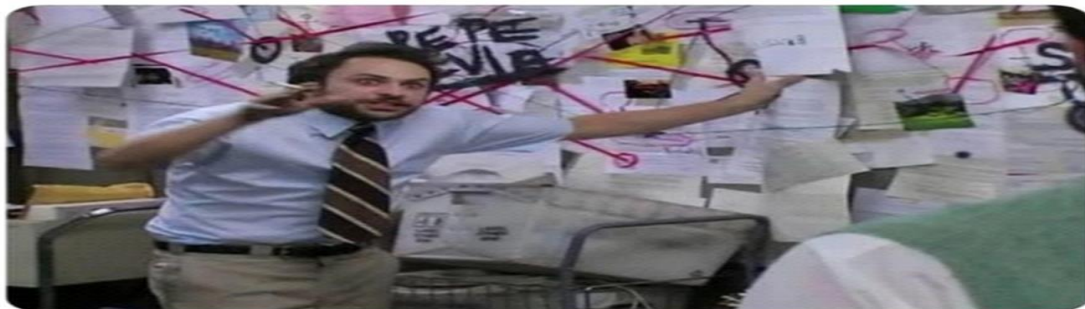
Research Tools

Sixteen memes are selected from different social media platforms like tweeter and Instagram. These memes are analyzed side by side using Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model research methodology adopted for this study is qualitative.

Data Analysis

The following selected memes are analyzed by using the socio-cognitive model of Van Dijk (sociolinguist).

History teachers in 2040 trying to explain wtf happened in pakistan in 2022.



Analysis: This picture portrays the complexity of Pakistan's political affairs in 2022, as the country has been in an economic and political crisis. There has been quite a lot of chaos among the political parties in Pakistan, and this turbulent situation is hard to absorb for common people. They are expecting the same for the next generation. The image that the memer used here represents people who are just as confused as this guy.



Analysis: This meme is a satire towards the newly elected prime minister who is ready to make a speech for his nation but seems like he needs help to deliver a speech. It is to show the ineligibility of Pakistan's leaders, who cannot even say a few words without the aid of a teleprompter. The last line was quite ironic when the memer said others are jealous of your success.



Analysis: This picture exhibits the thoughts of PMLN, which has implicated a ban on luxury imported items to fend off the financial crisis of Pakistan. However, these politicians have forgotten that they are called an imported government. Almost all the so-called leaders do not even bother to live among the people of their own country. That is why they are called an "imported government". However, people are concerned about the implication of their orders completely. If they are to ban imported goods, they should also be banned from being imported into Pakistan.



Analysis: People are comparing different politicians based on their morals. During the chaotic situation of Pakistani politics in 2022, some famous political figures showed their true faces. Some politicians thought to be great supporters of Imran Khan betrayed him during the time of distress. On the other hand, some friends sacrificed their position but did not let their leader down.

In this picture, politicians like Qasim Suri, Asad Qaisar and Ali Muhammad Khan were called school friends as most of our school friends share a positive energy towards us and never betray us. In the same way, politicians like Aleem Khan and Amir Liaquat were called university friends as they are often referred to as snake friends whom we trust but betray us.

Backbanhners in classroom: #NationalAssembly



Analysis: These are not lazy students tired of boring lectures and forced to attend school but are official honourable members of Pakistan's Parliament. In this picture, they are criticized for their low esteem and little interest towards the centre of power, Parliament. They did not even care about the honour of the great convention. With their hilarious sense of humour, Pakistani people called the backbenchers", referring to them as trouble-making.

Bilawal bhutto sad version



Analysis: Bilawal Bhutto, son of former president Asif Ali Zardari, followed in his father's footsteps, not just to Oxford but also in his limited grasp of Urdu and Sindhi. Bilawal, chairman Pakistan People's Party, who intends to become prime minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, cannot say a few words correctly in the language of the Pakistani people.

In this picture, his famous quote "kanpein tang" کانپے ٹانگ has been highlighted, which he said when he was addressing the people of Islamabad at a protest. He mispronounced some words, and nothing can go unnoticed before the eyes of the Pakistani people.



Analysis: This meme shows famous Pakistani actors like Fawad Khan, Humayun Saeed and Ahmed Shehzad. Their acting is compared to the acting of Pervaiz Elahi. Pervaiz Elahi has joined hands with Imran Khan to elect him as PM of Pakistan, recently after the resignation of Osman Buzdar as the chief minister of Punjab. Furthermore, in Punjab, a new election was held to elect the chief minister of Punjab. Both Pervaiz Elahi and Hamza Shehbaz are candidates. In the assembly, both parties started fighting, beating each other. PTI member threw Lota on the speaker of the Punjab assembly, and Pervaiz Elahi was seen showing thumbs up to PTI members and his party members that they are doing good. However, later, he claimed that PMLN members had broken his hand, which was shown as a political stunt to get attention in this meme. Most people, including PTI supporters, think he was doing an act. That is all portrayed through a single meme. However, there is no evidence of whether his hand was broken.



Analysis: In this meme, there is a criticism of all political leaders. Political leaders are considered a liar by most Pakistani people. They make promises before the election and when in opposition but move back from their commitments as soon as they get the government. All their promises are a lie to attract voters. In these memes, there is a criticism of police and political leaders and how they fool people.



Analysis: This meme shows the collaboration of PPPS and PMLN. Both parties join hands for a no-confidence motion against the Former PM of Pakistan, Imran Khan. Shehbaz Shareef was selected as PM of Pakistan and had to take difficult decisions. Prices are increasing daily in Pakistan, and all blame is on PMLN. Although all parties in PDM are making decisions collectively, still whole responsibility is on PM Shehbaz Shareef. This meme shows that Zardari is taking advantage of that, and it is like revenge, as PMLN is losing its supporters.



Analysis: IN this meme, there is a criticism of Former PM Nawaz Shareef. On Nawaz Shareef, there are many corruption cases. He was in jail when he left the country for treatment on doctors' recommendation. He was announced ineligible for PM of Pakistan. He moved to London for his treatment and did not return. In Pakistan, that is very common for everyone who commits corruption to leave the country with all the corrupted money. Nawaz Shareef's fleeing is compared with Amir Liaquat's. He left the country after his third wife filed for divorce, and he deceived Imran Khan. He left the country after defaming himself but still did not face the same insult Nawaz Shareef had faced.



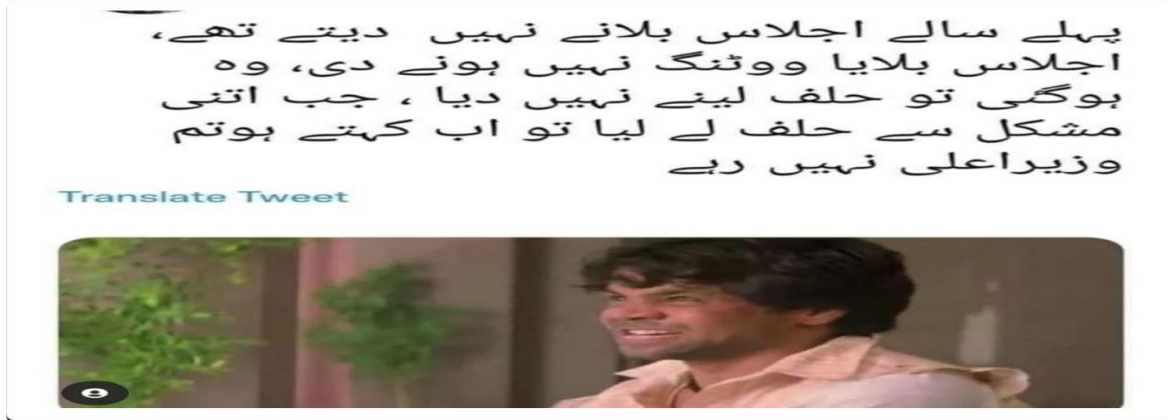
Analysis: This meme is showing trolling of Former PM Imran Khan. Imran Khan is trolling Nawaz Shareef in this meme. Nawaz Shareef was put in jail because of the corruption he committed in government. Imran Khan is trolling him by saying he was weeping in prison and asking for NRO. He cried so much that all the tissues of Attock jail finished. Imran Khan's statement also shows how miserable he felt in jail. Imran Khan's trolling is very satirical. Humour and satire are how a person can say anything without being rude. That is the quality of Pakistani people how; they say everything in a satirical manner.



Analysis: This image depicts Bilawal, the leader of the PPP, as a feminine figure. PMLN and PPS join hands for the no-confidence motion. This picture shows that Shehbaz Sharif is taking decisions with a mutual understanding of both parties. This picture also shows the nation's thoughts about the union that once there are going to the next elections blame game of both parties will start. Shehbaz Sharif would blame PPPs for wrong decisions that they had told me to make, and PPPs would blame them for everything. However, this is explained as satirical by showing Bilawal's feminine characteristics. This meme also criticizes Bilawal's way of speaking and his feminine character, which are natural. He is an English speaker and needs help understanding and speaking Urdu. One should not criticize anyone's character.



Analysis: The actress Iffat Omar and Maryam Nawaz are criticized in this meme. Iffat Omar is supporting PMLN and criticizing former PM Imran Khan, which is not bearable for PTI supporters. In a few PTI supporters, there is a lack of acceptance, and they cannot accept criticism. As Iffat Omar supported PMLN, Maryam invited her to her jalsa in Okara. Memes not only give information but also criticize politicians. Criticism is good, but one should not have the right to say anything about the other's character or something they do not know.



Analysis: This meme portrays a picture of Hamza Shehbaz after the resignation of Usman Buzdar as the Chief Minister of Pakistan. Hamza Shehbaz was one of the candidates with enough votes to be elected chief minister. As the speaker belongs to the PTI party, he did not address the assembly. Once the assembly was held, PTI and PMLN members fought on voting day. Both parties blamed each other for this. After the voting was done and Hamza Shehbaz was elected as chief minister of Pakistan Governor refused to take the oath because the Governor of Punjab also belonged to the PTI party. That issue was brought into court, and the oath was taken. Then PTI members refused to accept him as chief minister of Punjab. They are still saying he is not the Chief Minister of Punjab. That is quite a funny situation. Pakistani people, as a whole, are humorous and can make light of extremely difficult and serious situations into something fun.



Analysis: There is a sharp criticism of Maryam Nawaz in this meme. Her statement “zindagi me kabhi haram ka nawala ni khaya” is a quite ironical. There are hundreds of corruption cases against the Shareef family, but she still says that. In this picture, her statement is compared to the statement that “mene kabhi mobiil use ni kia”, a person using a mobile and tweeting still saying that. That is the case with Maryam's statement doing corruption and saying that. A comparison of both statements is satirical.



Analysis: In this memer wrote the statement of “Sazish” of Former prime minister Pakistan. He is saying American conspiracy and interference brought the no-confidence motion against him. After the no-confidence motion, he held many campaigns. He constantly says of “American conspiracy” and interference in his every campaign. In this meme, it is explained satirically. During his three years of government, Ramadan was 29 days, and that year it was 30 days; it was also a conspiracy. There is no evidence whether the interference and conspiracy were done, but he is constantly saying there is a probability that conspiracy and interference were done.

Findings and Discussion

Political memes and tweets perform the function of portraying Pakistani leaders. Social media has allowed ordinary people to speak out against the improper use of political leaders' power. Memes or Tweets manipulate ideologies, beliefs and promises that political leaders have made. Memes have the power to convey serious issues. People can understand a lot through memes in fewer words. Memes act as a bridge between political parties and common people. Memes portray a contradiction in leaders' sayings in opposition and Govt. If we see the recent scenario after the no-confidence motion in 2022, Imran Khan was in opposition when he criticized PMLN and said that

he would change Pakistan if he were selected as Prime Minister of Pakistan. Moreover, when he was in government, he did nothing as such innovative.

Still, one major step he took was to eradicate corruption from Pakistan. During his period, the inflation rate was increasing on a daily basis, but he said that prices were not under the control of the government. At that time PMLN was in opposition. They criticized him and said he was incapable of becoming PM of Pakistan as he could not control prices and brought a no-confidence motion. Now they are in government, but prices are increasing daily, and they say it is because of Imran Khan. Furthermore, on the other hand, now Imran Khan is criticizing PMLN for the increase in prices of everything. The parties have a motto that they are working for the nation. In their campaigns, they use rallying cries to promise to serve humanity and work for the welfare of their nation. They claim to be advocates for human rights, but in this instance, they are violating human rights by failing to provide basic health care services to the general public. They bear the burden of proof because they are Pakistani, and faithful nationalists, as they liberally show at the time of elections. They should not make others feel bad or dumb. They must not be employed as alleged politicians. Through online media, man has a total grip on everything happening around him and the opportunity to share his ideas anytime and anywhere. This is because of developments in the media and information technology. The availability of the internet is the easiest way to create this kind of hassle on social media. Social media has the power to elevate any kind of little or serious matter.

From the analysis of memes above, we can see that people are too comfortable on social media to give their opinions without considering the consequences. There was a study proposed by Dr Michael Workman (associate professor of technology and management at a University of United States) found out a fact about social media as: "it was revealed that when someone tries to have an opinion on something, social media can change their perceptions and automatically their opinions too," Without knowing the fact that their opinion can change perceptions of other people, they post anything which can make other people accept or go against political parties.

People use slangs and abusive words to call out political leaders of Pakistan, but no one should ever forget that those politicians are also human beings who deserve respect too. People should remember basic ethical values. Ethical values are bases for knowing a person's morales. Social media's prevalent effects on social media users, which includes kids and immature minds, can cause negative effects. It is not a bearable motive to call them "choor" and "zanana" because we instill this term in our children, who will undoubtedly absorb it, make random perceptions and adopt amoral values. Tweets and memes of this kind should be avoided. We must remember and consider the excellent services they have provided in some way, and we must not swear or criticize them by calling them with unpleasant names just for the sake of laugh.

Recommendations and conclusion

The purpose of this research was to know the multi-layered meanings of memes, to understand politics and their power and resistance through memes and to learn how memes act as a factor in manipulating the political mindset of the young generation. For this study qualitative method of research is used. This study demonstrates that the common man can influence political leaders' ideologies by utilizing social media platforms. Memes on social media have not only got people talking about politics, but they have also become integral to providing the latest news, entertainment, and awareness. The average person can now comment, share, and upload the most recent informative but also funny, ironic, and satirical content.

This study suggests that social media research needs to be greatly expanded. Political memes and tweets are powerful enough to draw attention to serious and trivial issues in a lighter satirical tone to attract the public's and political parties' attention. Research should be constructive and serve humanity rather than just research. Because these memes serve as a public voice to raise voices against injustice and usurpation of the rights of oppressed, social media users should be aware of their responsibilities. Political memes and tweets can significantly alter people's attitudes and points of view. It may have a significant effect on political parties' vote bank. This study is based on only an analysis of collected memes. Future research needs to be conducted by taking an interview with people. How they see memes and interpret them needs to be studied in future.

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