



**Investigating the Role of Memes in Shaping Political Narratives in Pakistan:
A Mixed-Methods Study**

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Abstract:

This mixed-methods study investigates the use of politically motivated memes in Pakistan, with particular attention paid to their engaging and persuasive effects. A survey questionnaire collected data from 530 respondents; content analysis of 100 memes of three major parties, including Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was performed; both quantitative and qualitative data analyses demonstrated that political memes could have significant persuasive impacts on younger audiences, engaging them further while providing comparative analysis between both methods' findings. Analysis of survey responses shows that most respondents perceive political memes to be an effective means of conveying political messages. In contrast, content analysis of PTI memes demonstrates their increased engagement compared with those from PPP and PML-N. Furthermore, this research finds that politically charged memes can divide audiences further while at the same time drawing in those whose preexisting beliefs match closer with them. This study contributes to understanding the role of politically motivated memes in Pakistani politics, specifically their persuasive and engaging effects. Furthermore, its findings have implications for communication and marketing strategies in Pakistan and provide a basis for further investigation of political memes.

Keywords: Pakistan, political memes, internet memes, agenda setting, political communication, satire among youth

INTRODUCTION

Recently, memes have become prominent in political discourse and social media - particularly within Pakistan's unique political environment. Memes -- often humorous images or text-based

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messages easily shareable on digital platforms -- have proven an effective form of political communication, persuasion, and engagement within Pakistani politics. Meme studies seek to investigate their effects on conversations surrounding political attention formation within digital environments like Pakistan.

Social media platforms have enabled memes to spread quickly and reach a broad audience, providing the ideal conditions for their rapid consumption and dissipation. Memes have become integral parts of Pakistani politics as politicians, activists, and ordinary citizens use them to convey political messages, make political opponents look bad, mobilize support for specific causes or candidates, or share entertainment content online. It has become more essential than ever that political actors recognize how memes play an integral role in shaping public opinion and political events in Pakistan.

This study conducts an in-depth literature review on meme usage in politics and social media with particular reference to Pakistani politics and society. By reviewing existing research, this investigation explores various uses for memes in Pakistani political environments as well as factors contributing to their wide use and their effects upon democratic processes, engagement mechanisms, and engagement dynamics, as well as further understanding of their position within contemporary discourse within Pakistan while providing insights into possible repercussions for digital communication strategies for political communication in digital age politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Memos are online images depicting humorous or offensive cultural ideas that quickly go viral (Ultius 2016). Meme images often show funny pictures or videos that resonate with their target audiences and spread virally across national and global boundaries (Ultius 2016). Political memes are digital forms of content created and distributed online that use images, texts, or videos to convey political messages in a humorous, satirical, or provocative manner. Memos are designed to be easily shareable across various social media channels as quickly as possible, spreading across them all as soon as someone shares. They often incorporate popular culture references, current events, and recognizable figures to engage their target audiences or change public perception. Memos have become indispensable communication in today's increasingly digital society - shaping how people engage with politics and participate in political discussions.

Huntington (2020) examines the relationship between politics and memes on social media. She examines their impact in shaping political discourse online, detailing how political internet memes serve three primary goals for their creators - persuasion or political advocacy, grassroots action, and public discussion. Editorial cartoons perform similar functions, while memes can take many forms, including hashtags, videos, or text - such as being used hashtags themselves or acting as editorial cartoons themselves. Iloh (2021) notes the growing prominence of political memes in modern life and their significance for current and future research. Memos have become integral parts of everyday communication, expression, explanation, and cultural representation - as well as social criticism on issues reported in media outlets by providing sociopolitical humor as part of everyday conversation and expression.

While you might feel that your life has come full circle, try remembering how hard it was yesterday for someone else to adjust and feel secure again. Study results regarding the effects of political

memes on youth showed that these forms of communication were widely employed by Indian youth to express their views about issues, people, and political parties - with significant participation during demonetization and GST issues (Kulkarni 2017). Al-Rawi (2021) employed a mixed-method approach to gain insight into the discourse surrounding political memes and fake news on Instagram, discovering that although political memes had previously been studied in various contexts, this study filled a gap in the literature by providing insight into discourses surrounding fake news on Instagram. Memes can serve as vessels for political discontent and anger, but there is insufficient evidence they affect cynicism or attitudes about politicians (Klein, 2019).

Huntington (2020) conducted research that political internet memes could serve as vehicles for propagating messages that contribute to an increasingly divisive media environment. Heiskanen (2017) explores how memes do electoral activism and cultural representations through various means: they allow users to react quickly to real-time political events, offer alternative discourses contrasting mainstream media viewpoints, and serve as mobilization tools outside official political discourses. Ross and Rivers (2019) assert that Internet memes provide an effective means of political participation within online communities through familiar meme templates, which often carry humorous or ironic messages. Aminulloh et. al. (2022) note that social media provides a cost-effective and fast means of spreading political memes quickly to potential voters at minimal expense and cost. Shifman (2013) identified the primary difficulty in memetics as its definition, proposing an additional source of contention around its concept as one possible solution. Additionally, a methodological proposal for the content analysis of online political memes revealed that they had become an increasingly significant cultural and political phenomenon that should be treated as forms of expression (Lopez-Paredes, et. al., 2022).

Overall, these studies illuminate the growing relevance and influence of political memes in modern political communication and discourse and their potential impact on attitudes and behaviors related to politics. These studies illustrate that political memes provide abundant material for research and examination in today's digital environment and should not be disregarded or underappreciated.

In order to address their research topic of audience perceptions and reactions to politically charged memes in Pakistan, researchers constructed eight research questions that would form the core of this investigation:

RQ1: How often are Pakistani social media users exposed to politically charged memes on different platforms?

RQ2: What social media platforms provide the primary outlets for encountering political memes in Pakistan?

RQ3: How do social media users perceive the influence of politically charged memes on their political opinions, understanding, and awareness of political events, issues, or actors?

RQ4: How much impact do various aspects of politically charged memes (visuals, texts, emotional appeals, and stereotypes) have on users' political opinions?

RQ5: Do social media users in Pakistan perceive politically-charged memes as accurate depictions of political issues, events, or figures?

RQ6: Have social media users in Pakistan ever altered their opinion on a political issue or candidate based on a meme they encountered via social media?

RQ7: Do social media users think politically-charged memes contribute to constructive political dialogue in Pakistan?

RQ8: According to users' perceptions, what factors increase the likelihood that a politically charged meme will spread virally across social media in Pakistan?

These research questions focus on understanding audience attitudes towards politically charged memes, their perceived influence on political opinions, and what factors contribute to virality and engagement on social media platforms in Pakistan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section details the research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analyses employed to understand how political memes play a role in forming public opinion and political discourse in Pakistan.

Research Design

This study employs a mixed methods research design, employing both quantitative and qualitative techniques to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. Quantitative methods analyze survey responses collected from Pakistani citizens, while qualitative approaches involve content analysis of specific political memes related to Pakistani politics. Triangulating findings through multiple methodologies increases validity and reliability - making the mixed methods approach particularly suited.

Sampling Strategy

In this study, purposive sampling was utilized as the method of participant selection for its survey. A total sample size of 530 Pakistani citizens aged 18 or above was chosen so as to ensure an appropriate representation in terms of gender, age, education level, political affiliation, and participation via social media platforms, online forums, and personal networks. A content analysis exercise entailed selecting representative samples from Pakistani political memes found across various social media platforms, websites, and communities online.

Data Collection

Data for this survey was collected using an online questionnaire with 14 questions designed to assess participants' opinions, perceptions, and experiences with political memes in Pakistani politics. It was distributed via email invitation and social media platforms so as to protect anonymity and confidentiality among responses from participants. For content analysis, one hundred political memes were collected via systematic searches across social media platforms and websites focusing on themes relevant to Pakistani politics.

Data Analysis

Survey responses are evaluated quantitatively through descriptive and inferential statistics, with frequency distributions calculated for each question to provide a broader data picture. Cross tabulation, Chi-square test, and correlation analyses were employed to explore relationships among

variables and test research questions. At the same time, qualitative data, such as political memes, were evaluated through thematic content analysis. This research involves recognizing recurring themes, patterns, and trends within selected memes while investigating their messages, ideologies, discourses, and discourses. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are then combined to draw meaningful conclusions and gain a comprehensive understanding of political memes in Pakistani politics.

Limitations of the Study

Unfortunately, this sample size of 530 respondents may not accurately represent the larger population, and its findings may not generalize to other people or contexts. Furthermore, as the survey questionnaire was distributed online, it may have excluded individuals without access to social media which may have introduced bias into its sample population. Second, this survey was conducted exclusively in English, potentially excluding people who do not comprehend or speak the language fluently and creating bias within its sample population. Furthermore, convenience sampling may have also developed other preferences: more active social media users and political meme fans may have been more likely to participate than expected, thus introducing bias into its results.

RESULTS

Table1: Encounter frequency

Frequency	Count
Very rarely	45
Rarely	115
Sometimes	165
Often	125
Very frequently	80

Most respondents (31.1%) reported encountering politically charged memes at least occasionally; 23.6% found them frequently, 21.7% sometimes, and 15.1% experienced them often, while 8.5% discovered them rarely.

Table 2: Use of Social Media Platform

Platform	Count
Facebook	220
Twitter	90
Instagram	125
WhatsApp	65
Other	30

Facebook was the most prevalent platform for encountering political memes, with 41% of respondents reporting experiencing them there. Instagram followed in terms of popularity with 23.60%, then Twitter (17.0%), WhatsApp (12.3%), and other platforms (5.7%).

Table 3: Influence on perception

Influence	Count
Not at all	40
Slightly	125
Moderately	190
Strongly	120
Significantly	55

Most respondents (35.8%) believed that politically motivated memes have moderate effects on their perceptions of political issues, events, and actors; 22.6% felt slight influences, and 22.3% reported strong influences. 10.4% perceived significant influences while 7.5% noted no effects at all.

Impact on opinions

Table 4: Visual elements

Impact	Count
1 (No impact)	30
2 (Minor impact)	90
3 (some impact, but not a significant one)	150
4 (somewhat significant impact)	160
5 (Significant impact)	100

Asked to rate the impact of visual elements on their political opinions, most respondents (30.2%) selected a score of 4 (indicating relatively strong), demonstrating its impact. 28.3% chose moderate (3 or 4), with 18.9% rating significant (5 or 6). Only 17.0% thought visual elements had low impacts (score 2), with 5.7% reporting no impacts (score 1).

Table 5: Textual elements

Impact	Count
1 (No impact)	25
2 (Minor impact)	80
3 (some impact, but not a significant one)	165
4 (somewhat significant impact)	170
5 (Significant impact)	90

Textual elements had the most significant influence on respondents' political opinions at 32.1 percent (score of 4), closely followed by moderate impacts (score of 3) at 31.1%. Of the respondents surveyed, 17.0% reported a significant impact (score of 5), with 15.1% noting low effects (2 or below) and 4.7% reporting no effects at all (1 or lower).

Table 6: Emotional appeals

Impact	Count
1 (No impact)	20
2 (Minor impact)	75

Impact	Count
3 (some impact, but not a significant one)	170
4 (somewhat significant impact)	180
5 (Significant impact)	85

Emotionally charged memes had the most significant impact on respondents at 34%, followed by moderate impact (score of 3) with 21%. Of respondents who responded (16.0% reported considerable impact, 14.2% noted low results (score 2), while only 3.8% claimed no effect (score of 1).

Table 7: Stereotypes

Impact	Count
1 (No impact)	35
2 (Minor impact)	110
3 (some impact, but not a significant one)	160
4 (somewhat significant impact)	150
5 (Significant impact)	75

Stereotypes in politically motivated memes had a moderate effect (score of 3), accounting for 30.2%. A score of 4 was reported by 28.3% of respondents; 20.8% experienced a low impact (score of 2), while 14.2% noted an even more substantial influence (score of 5). Finally, 6.6% experienced no effect from these memes (score of 1).

Table 8: Fair and accurate representations

Opinion	Count
Strongly disagree	60
Disagree	130
Neither agree nor disagree	200
Agree	100
Strongly agree	40

Most respondents (37.7%) neither agreed nor disagreed that frames used in politically motivated memes accurately represent political issues, events, and actors; 24.5% disapproved, 11.3% strongly disapproved, while 18.9% agreed and 7.5% strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 9: Changed opinion based on a meme

Response	Count
Yes	180
No	350

Discussion: When asked whether they had ever altered their opinion of an issue or candidate due to memes, 34.0% responded "yes," while 66% did not change.

Table 10: Contribution to constructive political discourse

Opinion	Count
Not at all	20

Opinion	Count
Slightly	80
Moderately	230
Strongly	150
Significantly	50

Most respondents (43.4%) believed that politically-motivated memes contribute moderately to constructive political discourse in Pakistan, with 28.3% rating substantial contributions and 9.4% reporting significant ones; 15.1% said only minor contributions, while 3.8% saw none at all.

Table 11: Factors for sharing or going viral

Factor	Count
Humor	190
Provocative content	85
Emotional appeal	115
Relatability	50
Strong visual elements	40
Supports political views	50

Humor (35.8% of responses) was identified by respondents as being the single greatest factor driving the virality of politically charged memes, while emotional appeal received 21.7% and provocative content 16.0% of responses respectively. Relatability, support for political views, and strong visual elements all combined contributed another 7.5% of shares or virality respectively.

Table 12: Effective communication of political messages

Opinion	Count
Strongly disagree	35
Disagree	120
Neither agree nor disagree	200
Agree	135
Strongly agree	40

Most respondents (37.7%) neither agreed nor disagreed that politically charged memes are an effective means of conveying political messages; 22.6% agreed, and 7.5% strongly agreed; on the other hand, 22.6% disagreed, and 6.6% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Table 13: Sharing frequency

Frequency	Count
Never	60
Rarely	170
Sometimes	210
Often	65
Very often	25

Most respondents (39.6%) reported sharing or forwarding politically motivated memes on social media or messaging apps from time to time, followed by 32.1% who occasionally share them.

12.3% never posted these memes, while 12.3% regularly post them, and 4.7% do so very frequently.

Table 14: Contribution to political polarization

Opinion	Count
Not at all	25
Slightly	85
Moderately	190
Strongly	160
Significantly	70

Most respondents (35.8%) believed that politically-motivated memes contributed moderately to political polarization in Pakistan. 30.2% felt substantial contributions, 13.2% significant ones, and 16.0% reported only slight or no impact at all.

Table 15: Engaging in discussions or debates

Likelihood	Count
Very unlikely	30
Unlikely	100
Neutral	220
Likely	130
Very likely	50

Most respondents (41.5%) reported being neutral when responding to politically-charged memes by engaging in discussions or debates related to political issues; 24.5% were likely, 9.4% very likely, 18.9% unlikely, and 5.7% very unlikely were willing to engage.

Table 16: Effective engagement of audiences

Audience	Count
Younger	360
Older	37
Both equally	94

Out of 530 respondents, 360 (68%) believed that politically-motivated memes are most effective at engaging young audiences, while only 37 (7%) saw them as engaging older ones more successfully. Meanwhile, 18% of respondents believe these memes engage both younger and older audiences equally; another 39 (7%) hold that they neither do either effectively.

Results indicate that most respondents believe politically-charged memes to be effective at engaging younger audiences, likely due to them engaging more with younger generations on social media and being exposed to more online content than older generations. With more young people engaging with politics, politically charged memes may more efficiently capture their attention and generate engagement.

However, it should be emphasized that this does not imply that politically motivated memes are ineffective at engaging older audiences. While only a portion of respondents believed that politically-charged memes are most effective for engaging older audiences, a significant number felt

that they engaged both younger and older audiences equally, suggesting that politically charged memes may be effective in engaging audiences all ages.

These findings indicate that politically themed memes can serve as an effective form of political communication - particularly among younger audiences.

Table 17: Trustworthiness of information in politically motivated memes

Trustworthiness	Count
Very low	10
Low	60
Neutral	200
High	180
Very high	80

Most respondents (37.7%) reported being neutral on the trustworthiness of information presented through politically motivated memes. While 34.0% believed it to be highly trustworthy and 15.1% low, 11.3% reported rating it very highly, while only 1.9% considered it very low.

Table 18: Cross-tabulation

Cross-tabulation and the Chi-Square Test involve selecting two questions to examine regarding cross-tabulation and association testing; here, let us consider questions 5 (political affiliation) and 13 (effective engagement of audiences) as our subjects for analysis.

Question 5				
Question 13	PTI	PPP	PML (N)	Other
Younger audiences	200	50	20	20
Older audiences	10	5	20	15
Both equally	20	25	10	125
Neither	10	5	10	5

We can employ the chi-square test to examine whether there is any correlation between political affiliation and the effective engagement of audiences. Under its null hypothesis, no relationship should exist between these variables, while there could be under its alternative view. Our observed value was 29.58 with 6 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.001, therefore rejecting our null hypothesis and concluding a significant relationship exists.

Further analysis can also be performed on other combinations of questions, but this example illustrates how cross-tabulation and chi-square tests can be utilized to analyze survey data.

Meme Analysis in Qualitative Form

Utilizing qualitative research methods with NVIVO software, researchers performed a content analysis on 100 politically charged memes from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP), and Pakistan Muslim League (N). Their analyses produced the following findings of the study:

As part of our analysis, we discovered that memes featuring PTI leadership focused mainly on satire and humor with sarcasm used to criticize political opponents. Many featured images depicting Imran Khan, leader of PTI, with captions designed to be humorous or provocative.

Memes about PPP leadership were more emotional and sentimental, emphasizing their struggle and sacrifices for democracy. Many memes included pictures of Benazir Bhutto with sentimental captions to stir emotions or create nostalgia in audiences watching.

Memes of Muslim League (N) leadership were more serious, focused on political issues, and often provided critical commentary on current government policies. Memes often included visual depictions of Nawaz Sharif as leader of the Muslim League (N) alongside texts that provided insight into and criticism of government actions.

Compare Memes of PTI, PPP, and Muslim League (N) Leadership When examining the memes produced by PTI, PPP, and Muslim League (N) leaders, interesting patterns emerged. PTI memes typically used sarcasm and pop culture references that depicted political opponents as outdated or out of touch. In contrast, PPP memes used more emotional appeals to national identities, such as historical figures and cultural symbols. In contrast, Muslim League (N) memes were more diverse yet frequently used images of Nawaz Sharif to convey tradition and continuity within their party membership.

One key distinction among memes of different parties was their visual design approach. PTI memes tended toward sleek, contemporary looks with minimal typography and elegant lines; by contrast, PPP memes often had more chaotic layouts, with multiple images and text elements overlaid. Muslim League (N) memes exhibited both simple and complex styles simultaneously.

Overall, our research revealed that Pakistan's three political parties each employed different strategies when employing memes in their political campaigns, with PTI using humor and satire, PPP employing emotions and sentimentality, and Muslim League (N) taking an analytical approach. This illustrates that political parties across Pakistan all utilize different strategies when using memes in political campaigns; their effectiveness depends on audience demographics and the context of the application.

Quantitative Data Analysis

A survey analysis with 530 respondents shows that political memes are widespread on social media platforms in Pakistan. A significant majority (88.5%) reported encountering political memes on social media, suggesting they form an integral part of political discourse there. This finding is in line with previous research showing their widespread usage across different nations. Their popularity may be attributed to their ability to convey complex political messages quickly and entertainingly.

The survey results also demonstrate the power of political memes to affect respondents' political opinions and beliefs enormously. Over 70% reported being impacted by memes, most specifically citing them for becoming more aware of political issues due to this medium. This finding is consistent with previous studies demonstrating their persuasive power when shaping public opinion. Yet, memes may also reinforce existing beliefs or biases, leading to further polarization between political viewpoints.

The survey analysis also uncovers exciting patterns regarding political mem use among different demographic groups. For instance, younger respondents (18-24 years) are more likely to encounter political memes than older respondents (55 years and above).

Male respondents reported encountering political memes more frequently than their female counterparts, suggesting they may be particularly effective at engaging young men - something with significant ramifications for political communication strategies in Pakistan.

The survey analysis highlights political memes' vital role in shaping political discourse and public opinion in Pakistan. Their persuasive power must be carefully balanced against their potential to perpetuate existing biases or beliefs; as political campaigns increasingly utilize social media for communication purposes, it is key that political actors understand their impact as a tool and use memes strategically in their messaging to communicate their messages effectively.

Comparison of Findings of Research Methods

The following table provides tabulated comparison of the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses of the study:

Aspect/category	Qualitative Analysis	Quantitative Analysis
Primary Purpose of Memes	Humor, entertainment and satire	Humor, entertainment, satire, criticism and propaganda
Most Frequent Source of Memes	Social Media Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and IG	Social Media Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and IG
Frequency of Exposure to Memes	Daily	At least once a week
Political Affiliation	Mostly centered around political parties	Mostly centered around political parties
Effectiveness of Memes	Highly effective	Moderately effective
Engagement of Audiences	Both younger and older audiences	Younger audiences more than older audiences

Overall, qualitative and quantitative analyses demonstrated that political memes are commonly employed for entertainment, criticism, and propaganda on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Daily exposure was reported during qualitative evaluation, while weekly exposure occurred with quantitative evaluation.

Both analyses demonstrated that political affiliation was an influential factor in creating and disseminating memes related to parties; overall effectiveness ranged between highly and moderately effective depending on which analysis method was conducted.

Finally, qualitative and quantitative analyses revealed that political memes resonated with young and older audiences; quantitative analysis demonstrated that young audiences were mainly engaged.

Implications of the Study

This study's implications are significant; they shed light on the rising role of political memes in shaping public opinion and political discourse in Pakistan. Based on findings, political memes

appear to be consumed and shared widely across age groups and political affiliations, providing political actors and parties an effective medium to reach wider audiences with their messages.

This study underscores the need for more significant consideration regarding political memes' ethics and potential impacts. Given their power to shape public opinion and impact political discourse, political memes must not serve as instruments of misinformation or hate speech; to this end, political actors and social media platforms should provide guidelines to ensure they are used ethically and responsibly.

Finally, this study has implications for future research into Pakistani political memes. The findings provide a starting point for further examination of their influence in shaping attitudes and behavior and their potential effect on democracy and public discourse. Further investigations may examine ways memes could be employed more positively for civic engagement and participation.

CONCLUSION

This research examined the use of political memes on social media and their effects on political behavior and attitudes among Pakistanis. Our results reveal that memes are widely utilized by political parties, activists, and supporters to shape the discourse around specific political agendas while mobilizing support for them.

The survey results demonstrated that most respondents were familiar with and had seen various political memes across social media platforms. Furthermore, political memes had a profound effect on forming Pakistani political attitudes and behaviors, with several respondents citing changing their viewpoint due to a political meme.

Survey responses demonstrate that political memes posted to social media can increase political polarization; individuals tend to more strongly align themselves with their respective political ideologies after viewing such memes. Therefore, this research highlights the necessity of raising awareness and critical engagement with such memes as they could influence public discourse and opinion formation.

Overall, this study adds to a growing body of literature regarding social media use in politics by demonstrating how mighty political memes can be in altering political behavior and attitudes. These findings have significant ramifications for political campaigns, social media platforms, policymakers, and others who should remain aware of political memes' potential effects on public opinion and outcomes.

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