# DIGITAL DISCOURSE: POLITICAL MEMES ON FACEBOOK AND THEIR IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION IN PAKISTAN

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## Abstract

*This study explores the function and impact of political memes on Facebook in Pakistan, focusing on their role in promoting ideas and influencing public opinion. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study integrates audience reception analysis, content analysis, and textual interpretation to investigate both the language and visual elements, as well as the ideological foundations and persuasive techniques found in Pakistani political memes. Additionally, the study examines how Facebook users in Pakistan engage with and interpret these memes, assessing their effects on public discourse and political opinions. A sample of political memes from two Facebook pages, covering the period from 2018 to 2023, was selected for analysis. This time frame was chosen as it coincides with key political figures holding power during that period. The sample consists of four memes that represent a variety of political perspectives. The research applies Van Dijk's (2015) theory of social practices to analyse the memes' imagery and content. The findings of the study reveal that these memes mock the military's interference in democracy, ridicule politicians like Asif Ali Zardari and Shahbaz Sharif for corruption and inflation, and engage in personal attacks on Nawaz Sharif, using humor and religious references to influence public opinion. This study contributes to understanding the role of digital discourse in shaping political views and public debate in Pakistan.*

*Keywords:* Political memes, Facebook, public opinion, Pakistan, qualitative research, Van Dijk, social practices theory.

## INTRODUCTION:

Technological platforms are inseparable from each other in the modern era (Akram et al., 2021, 2022; Akram & Li, 2024; Ma et al., 2024). In recent years, social media platforms have developed into powerful tools for political communication, offering individuals never-before-seen opportunities to express their opinions, engage with political content, and influence public discourse (Castells, 2012; Tufecki, 2017). In Pakistan, Facebook has gained popularity among these people and has developed into a hub for political expression and conversation (Khan & Ayub, 2018; Saeed & Saeed, 2020). In the digital age, political memes have emerged as a distinctive form of communication that combine comedy, images, and a brief message to disseminate political ideas and viewpoints (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Limor, 2019; Milner, 2016). This research looks at the ways that political memes are utilised in Pakistan to disseminate messages and influence public opinion.

Due to their ease of sharing and attractive design, political memes have become a common mode of communication and engagement on social media (Shifman, 2014). Memes have the ability to swiftly disseminate information, catch users' attention, and elicit certain feelings in them (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023, 2020; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). They usually use humour, satire, or irony to make political messages relatable and engaging (Milner, 2013). They have thus become more well-liked as a tool for political communication

that draws social media users in and modifies their perceptions of political issues (Chen et al., 2015; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2018).

Pakistan provides an appealing backdrop for studying the role of Facebook political memes since it is a country with a sizable internet user population and a vibrant political scene. In Pakistan, social media platforms—particularly Facebook—have expanded quickly in recent years, providing users with an online platform to voice their opinions, mobilise support, and engage in political discourse (Khan & Ayub, 2018). In this digital age, political memes have emerged as a distinct kind of communication that people use to voice their political beliefs, critique prominent figures, and share thought-provoking ideas (Shabbir & Aftab, 2020).

There are significant implications for academic research and political discourse when comprehending the ways in which Facebook political memes disseminate ideas in Pakistan. We may be able to better understand how political ideas are generated, disseminated, and consumed online if we pay attention to the themes, arguments, and persuasive strategies included in these memes (Limor, 2019). It may also provide insight into the ways in which social media influences public opinion, political engagement, and the dynamics of Pakistani democracy (Saeed & Saeed, 2020).

In order to examine this phenomenon, this research will combine audience reception studies, textual interpretation, and content analysis using a qualitative methodology (Bastos & Raimundo, 2018; Lim, 2017; Shifman, 2014). We will examine the language and visual elements, ideological underpinnings, and persuasive strategies of a wide variety of Facebook memes pertaining to Pakistani politics. In order to comprehend how these memes impact political debate and how the general public views them, we will also look at how Pakistani Facebook users share, use, and interpret these images. The rise of social media platforms like Facebook has transformed the way political discourse is conducted in Pakistan, with political memes emerging as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion.

This research looks into Facebook political memes in Pakistan in an effort to improve our knowledge of the connection between social media, politics, and communication (Chadwick, 2013; Limor, 2019). In addition to expanding our knowledge of the dissemination and consumption of political ideas in the digital age, the research will help policymakers, media experts, and political professionals interact with voters in a more mediated and meme-driven political environment. However, little is known about how these memes, which blend humor, ideology, and persuasive language, influence public perception and discourse on critical political issues. This study addresses the gap by analyzing political memes on Facebook in Pakistan from 2018 to 2023, focusing on their language, visual elements, and ideological undertones. It examines how these memes engage users and influence their political views, specifically in the context of political figures and institutions.

**Research Objectives**

- To analyse the themes, rationales, and persuasive techniques employed in political memes on Facebook in Pakistan.
- To explore how Facebook users in Pakistan engage with and perceive political memes.
- To assess the influence of political memes on Facebook on public opinion and political discourse in Pakistan.

**Research Questions**

- In what ways do political memes on Facebook shape the opinions and behaviours of Pakistani users on social media?
- What ideologies and political themes are conveyed through these memes?
- How do Facebook users in Pakistan interact with and interpret political memes?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This theory was first put out by Richard Dawkins, who spoke about the role of genes known as replicators in biological evolution. Instead, to characterise cultural evolution, Dawkins chose to use the words memes, dissemination, and cultural imitation (Roosinda & Alfraita, 2020). Brodie (2014) asserts that memes are the main source of information in the mind and that they have an impact on a wide range of amazing events, which in turn inspires the production of new memes in the brains of others. Since memes were first created to comment on and critique injustice, humour and satire have become its most crucial elements (Kulkarni, 2017; Dynel, 2016; Yoon, 2016). Memes are easily recognisable and extensively circulated, and they have developed into a crucial part of internet culture (Shifman, 2013). People may easily convey their thoughts via memes, including criticism of political issues (Mina, 2014). Cultural inventions known as "internet memes" are shared from person to person over the internet, but with time, they develop into both a fascinating online phenomena and a generally acknowledged societal phenomenon (Shifman, 2013; Nugraha et al., 2015).

Memes are a common way for political activists to communicate online. Hiring paid bloggers, microbloggers, and commenters to generate content is standard procedure. Political memes, which blend comedy, images, and a brief message to disseminate political ideas and viewpoints, have emerged as a unique communication style on social media platforms (Limor, 2019; Milner, 2016). According to studies, political memes have the power to convince, engage, and impact audiences' political attitudes and behaviours (Wojcieszak & Smith, 2018; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Meme analysis is vital because political satire fulfils two important social purposes (Nilssen, 1990). Memes first discredit politicians by outlining their philosophies, drawing attention to their differences, and intimidating their opponents. Secondly, it provides a political rationale for their objections. Researchers have seen the ability of internet memes to assist social movements and sway public opinion in a variety of contexts (Hristova, 2014; Harlow, 2013; Dare & Sci, 2014).

Social media platforms have altered the dynamics of political communication by providing individuals with new means of voicing their opinions, engaging with political content, and mobilising support (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024; Ramzan et al., 20221; Castells, 2012; Papacharissi, 2016). Scholars (Boulianne, 2015; Vaccari et al., 2015; Ramzan & Khan, 2024) assert that social media sites such as Facebook have the power to impact public discourse and encourage political participation. In Pakistan, Facebook has grown quickly and is now a popular platform for political speech and discussion (Khan & Ayub, 2018; Saeed & Saeed, 2020). Research has examined the challenges and opportunities presented by Pakistani online political discourse, Facebook's function in political mobilisation, the impact of social media on political engagement, and Tufekci, 2013; Zaidi, 2015.Despite the fact that political memes have been extensively studied, their specific role and impact in the Pakistani context have received less attention. Research examining the subjects and content

of political memes in Pakistan has shown how they are used as satirical, essential, and expressive political tools (Shabbir & Aftab, 2020). To fully comprehend the strategies of influence, the philosophical underpinnings, and the reception of Facebook political memes in Pakistan, further investigation is necessary.

## METODOLOGY

To go further into the phenomenon, a qualitative research approach is used, with a focus on understanding the themes, content, and persuasive strategies employed by Pakistani Facebook political memes, as well as how they are perceived and impact public opinion. A full understanding of the research subject is made possible by qualitative techniques, which closely examine the social and cultural context. The approach was selected to look at the substance and persuasive techniques of political Facebook memes from Pakistan, comprehend their meanings, and discover more about how Facebook users see and comprehend them. This approach will deepen our knowledge of how political memes on Facebook shape public opinion and political debate in Pakistan.

## SAMPLING

For this research, a sample of political memes from various Facebook pages between 2018 and 2023 is chosen.This time span was chosen because certain politicians held positions of power throughout that time. There are four memes in the sample, chosen from two Facebook sites. This examination looks at the images and content produced by meme sites.

## CHAPTER 4
## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Van Dijk's (2015) theory of social practices, Facebook political meme generation, consumption, and dissemination all occur in Pakistan. These traditions, which are impacted by the political, social, and cultural dynamics of Pakistani society, have an effect on how political messages are received and spread via memes. This theoretical framework provides a comprehensive way to understand the meanings that Pakistani political Facebook memes convey.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION



This meme shows Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, and former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi sitting aboard an aircraft. The origin of this meme dates back to March 11, 2022, when Imran Khan, the former prime minister, took part in the induction ceremony at the Kamra airport and sat in the cockpit of the Chinese aircraft J-10 C. This was a menacing meme that linked his experience on the aircraft to previous instances when both Nawaz Sharif and Shahid Khaqan Abbasi were there and subsequently struggled to enjoy their roles as prime ministers. Thus, this was seen as a sign that Imran Khan would also be unable to serve out his tenure as Pakistan's prime minister.

This meme is funny because it compares the state of previous president Asif Ali Zardari to that of Imran Khan and Shehbaz Sharif when they were prime ministers. The meme's right side shows Mr. Zardari as a wheelchair user while Imran Khan was prime minister, and its right side shows him as healthy when Shehbaz Sharif is in that role after the PMLN, PPP, JUIF, and other parties joined forces. This satirical piece highlights how politicians, who do not belong to the ruling party, would fabricate medical conditions to protect themselves from prosecution.

This Shahbaz Sharif meme compares two photographs by combining them. In the first picture, "the art" is a man without any money in his pockets; in the second, "the artist" is Shahbaz Sharif. Should one conclude that Shahbaz Sharif is the root of poverty, this suggests that he is the creator of the "art of empty pockets." It suggests that the primary driver of inflation is Shahbaz Sharif's administration. The impoverished have had their wallets drained by inflation. Shahbaz Sharif is the creator of this inflation.

Maryam Nawaz declares in this meme that her father, Nawaz Sharif, is adored and popular among Pakistanis, saying, "Nawaz Sharif hr Ghar me Basta he." The memes that have appropriated Maryam Nawaz's pro-Nawaz Sharif proclamation and disseminated it with light-hearted commentary have debunked it. The memer says that Nawaz does not live in his house and that Nawaz recite "Ayat ul Kursi" every night before bed. The Quranic verse "Ayat-ul-Kursi" is recited by Muslims to promote sound sleep and to request protection from "Satan and Devils." Thus, this meme seems immoral and engages in personal attack by comparing Nawaz Sharif to the devil.

**DISCUSSUION**

Data were used to examine political memes with two well-known politicians, Shahbaz Sharif and Imran Khan. This study focusses on the ways that humour may be used to satirise political figures and the country's current political landscape. The data presented indicates that satirical memes have a big effect on those who use social media. Because viewers are more interested in humorous and user-generated entertainment than in formal and straight information, the data under investigation showed how these memes affect audience perception and views.

The social media platform used in this research is Facebook. Among other applications, Facebook is the most popular social networking site where users may post content and connect with each other at any time and from any location. A meme may become viral very rapidly on the internet if it is shared. Memes are being shared in a different way,

according this poll, because of the recent Facebook habit of like comments and mentioning friends and family.

The first meme serves as an example of how the military elite meddle in a democracy. After Imran Khan was removed from office as prime minister, this meme became viral. The selection of memes is based on the most popular ones that people can identify with and share, along with their own thoughts on the role played by the military establishment in the democratic process. This meme attempted to promote the idea that all of these prime leaders were overthrown by the military.

Figure 02's meme, which contrasts Asif Ali Zardari's health under Imran Khan's leadership with that of Shehbaz Sharif, is especially hilarious. This kind of framing exposes how politicians who are not members of the ruling party would fabricate medical conditions to protect themselves from lawsuits.

In figure 3 meme featuring Shahbaz Sharif combines two images to compare them. A guy without any money in his pockets is "the art" in the first image; Shahbaz Sharif is "the artist" in the second. In the event that it is determined that Shahbaz Sharif is the cause of poverty, this implies that he is the inventor of the "art of empty pockets." It implies that Shahbaz Sharif's government is the main cause of inflation. Inflation has depleted the pockets of the destitute. The originator of this inflation is Shahbaz Sharif.

The meme, which can be seen in figure 04, has Maryam Nawaz praising his father Nawaz Sharif by saying, "Nawaz Sharif hr Ghar me Basta he," indicating how much Pakistanis adore and respect him. In response to such a remark, some meme creators produce memes centred on it. The memer says that Nawaz does not live in his house and that Nawaz recite "Ayat ul Kursi" every night before bed. The Quranic verse "Ayat-ul-Kursi" is recited by Muslims to promote sound sleep and to request protection from "Satan and Devils." Thus, this meme seems immoral and engages in personal attack by comparing Nawaz Sharif to the devil.

## CONCLUSION

The study's goal is to find out how political memes on Facebook are used to spread messages in Pakistan. The research emphasises the significance of Facebook memes on the internet and their use on social media. Memes are a humorous way to express one's ideas and an essential part of public information distribution networks. They simplify the material into a single, more profound visual image and educate the audience about topics that are seldom covered in the news. A well-informed and widely-understood meme has the potential to increase public knowledge of politics and governance while also igniting intense controversy and discussion. Politics are brought up by subjects that get little coverage from other news outlets, gain popularity via memes, and are shunned by the media.

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