
Understanding Meme Culture: A Content Analysis of Memes as Contemporary Digital Communication

Mahnoor Farhan Ali

BS Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bahria University, Karachi
Email: mahnoorfharhanali2@gmail.com

Bushra Ali

BS Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bahria University, Karachi
Email: Bushraali162005@gmail.com

Haniya Riaz

BS Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bahria University, Karachi
Email: hriaz7099@gmail.com

Abstract

While many studies have discussed the role of memes in communication, there is very little systematic, empirically validated research that has explored the role of memes in the Pakistani online communities. This study examines the role of online memes as a form of communication, the function of multimodal elements in the construction of meaning, and the role of memes in the formation and/or reflection of collective identity and ideology. The study adopts a convergent parallel approach by integrating critical discourse analysis of ten internet memes spread during the 2025 India-Pakistan tensions and the eight semi-structured interviews with participants, using a three-dimensional model by Fairclough as well as multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics. The results indicate that humor is not an alternative to substantive communication but its main means of expression; political criticism, expression of identity and emotional processing is carried out through the interaction of text, picture, culture and platform resources, all of which are associated with humor. The study offers an empirical description of the Pakistani digital meme culture and suggests that memes are a serious and sophisticated language of public discourse that has implications for media literacy education.

Keywords: Digital communication, Meme culture, Online communities, Public discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

With the majority of the world's population active on social media, memes are everywhere these days and are an integral part of everyday communication. The Cambridge Dictionary defines meme as an idea, joke, image or video that circulates quickly on the internet; in the real world, memes have become much more than a form of humor. Memes are a common way for people to interact with others, whether friends, family, or strangers, and a large number of studies have looked at the impact of memes on communicative life of people from Gen Z to the Millennials.

Memes are immensely effective communicators that capture the culture and society and contribute to the formation of online discourse (Mukhtar et al., 2024). They integrate images and text to communicate complex messages in a fast and efficient manner and can also convey political messages, consolidate stereotypes, convey opposition and influence public opinion beyond their entertainment value (Hassan et al., 2023). Memes are shared on social media platforms like Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram, and can have several meanings that shape the perception of the events of the world that are unfolding (Lestari et al., 2024). This study looks specifically at the Pakistani digital context and its associated memes, paying special attention to online confession spaces and comment sections where user negotiation of meaning takes place.

There are a number of studies that have taken different takes on memes. Bhandari (2025) examined memes to analyse their implications within various age groups and how they create public opinion, as well as highlighting misinformation and cultural insensitivity in the spread of memes. In addition to the positive effects of internet memes on youth communication, Zhang (2025) explored the negative impact of internet memes on youth communication and suggested that there is a need for media literacy education and more rigorous content control in the context of the use of internet memes in education. Participative digital culture as a whole has seen audiences no longer as passive consumers as they reinterpret and recontextualise meme messages by commenting, sharing, and likening, making memes a communal communicative process, not a static visual object. Audience reception analysis is therefore pivotal to the understanding of how digital meanings are negotiated and reinforced online.

Although many studies have focused on memes as satirical, ideological, or intercultural communication devices (Hassan et al., 2023; Lestari et al., 2024; Mukhtar et al., 2024; Dwivedi, 2023), most of them have neglected to consider the audience's role and participatory discourse in the creation of memes. In the Pakistani digital space specifically, there has been little focus on the user experience of understanding, negotiating and reacting to memes in online confession spaces and comment sections, and systematic content analysis of memes and UGC responses to memes is limited. This gap restricts understanding of how online communication is collaboratively constructed, and the present study employs structured content analysis of memes and audience interaction within selected Pakistani online communities to address it. Closing this gap matters not only academically but practically, since the same digital spaces this study examines are also where a large share of political opinion among young Pakistanis is actually formed, contested, and revised on a daily basis.

As social media has become the primary site of public discourse, understanding how meaning is constructed through visual culture is increasingly necessary. Research on memes in the Pakistani context also contributes to the localized study of digital communication, a field that remains underdeveloped relative to Western-centric scholarship, despite the country's large, young, and digitally active population for whom memes are an everyday communicative resource rather than a peripheral novelty. This paper therefore explores the nature of online memes as a new form of communication, the multimodal nature of the construction of meaning in memes through the use of image, text and symbol, and the role that memes play in the construction of collective identity and ideology. The literature review that follows outlines the genesis, development and theoretical refinement of the meme concept, given that it had its roots in evolutionary biology and was later adopted into the realm of digital culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Origins and History

Richard Dawkins (1976) used the term meme in his book *The Selfish Gene* to suggest that cultural evolution could be compared to biological evolution by means of genes (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins described memes as ideas, behaviors, or trends, catchphrases, fashions, tunes, and traditions, which are passed between people by imitation, as genes are passed between organisms in a population. He found three characteristics of a successful meme: longevity, fecundity, and copying fidelity (from the Greek *mimeme*, something imitated). This idea became the basis of the theory of memetics (Darwinian theory of cultural evolution). Subsequent elaborations have been offered: Hofstadter (1979) likened memes to self-replicating patterns of information that he referred to as mind viruses, and Dennett (1991) proposed that memes are the basis of human culture and thought, and he introduced a competition for them to survive in a "marketplace of ideas. Memetics, however, faced criticism that it overstated the genetic determinism and that it underestimated the influence of intention, interpretation, and context on cultural transmission when compared to genetic replication, which is a strictly Darwinian process. Nevertheless, the essential tenet of the theory, the idea that ideas and cultural forms fight for attention and survival in a population of minds, survived the demise of the more limited memetics project and returned in the more recent study of digital communication decades later, reincarnated in a new form.

2.2 Evolution in the Digital Era

As the digital age came upon us, memes were redefined as visual objects to be spread online, starting in the early 2000s on sites like 4chan, Something Awful, and early blogs. Shifman (2014) gave a major redefinition of what an online meme is, suggesting that online memes are "sets of digital objects that share content, form, or stance, produced with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and modified by many online users. The next phase of evolution was experimentation (rage comics, flash animation, 2000-2004), mainstream popularity (static macros went viral on Facebook and Tumblr, 2005-2011), and diversification (reaction GIFs, short-form video clips, glitch-effected "deep fried" memes since 2012). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) explored youth development in online affinity spaces, noting juxtaposition and remixing as productive practices and not just imitation. Despite criticism of the ephemerality of the memes (Dennett, 1991; Shifman, 2014), AI is becoming more prevalent and memes are spreading across the world today. This path, from a small theoretical idea to a global, communicative practice, provides an example of how digital infrastructure can speed up and transform a cultural mechanism that was originally theorised in all offline terms into a process that takes place in minutes or hours.

The architecture of the platform is also crucial for the formation and circulation of memes. Memes are created and disseminated in different ways on TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter/X. For short-form video memes, popular content on TikTok and YouTube Shorts features bold text, fast cuts, unexpected gags, and exaggerated facial expressions (Zhang, 2025), combining elements of speed and expression to boost engagement. Memes also rise and fall as audience preference and platform algorithms shift, and institutional actors, news

organizations, government bodies, and companies, increasingly adopt memes to communicate. Akondo et al. (2026) found that platform algorithms shape the distribution of political content unevenly: TikTok's "For You" page promotes protest-related memes, while X filters some political content. E-commerce brands also use memes to reach younger audiences organically, but official or commercial use of memes can result in the brand's lack of authenticity, and the handling of potentially offensive content is still a challenge; Younis and Amer (2026) argue that the study of the function of memes in opinion formation and political engagement is still under-researched. The rise of the use of the meme as a medium for institutional communication is a sign of a larger trend of the perceived legitimacy of humor as a register for serious institutional communication, and of the new questions that arise when formal institutions appropriated a communicative form created in informal, peer-to-peer digital culture.

2.3 Present Culture of Memes

By the mid-2020s, memes were an advanced type of digital folklore that rapidly and adaptively circulated in social media, news consumption, and political discussion (Shifman, 2021). The short-form video memes of the contemporary attention economy, like “doom-scrolling” formats, which are often absurd, are combined with AI-generated surreal videos, glitch art and deepfakes on TikTok and Instagram Reels (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). These memes can also serve as tools for activism and coping among Gen Z, helping to empower communities in times of climate protests or financial crises, for example (Denisova, 2019).

Brands have taken to meme marketing strategies, such as humorous responses on Twitter, AI-generated content, and more, all geared towards creating authenticity and viral engagement (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The complexity of memes is seen in their ability to create communities through remixing while also propagating misinformation, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, humorous content was more likely to be shared than factual information (Kozinets & Fantone, 2022). It is a stage of meme culture that represents a democratized form of communication that is ironical, nostalgic, and subversive, typical of post-truth discourse (Shifman, 2021). In this context it becomes harder for the audience to distinguish between sincere statement and ironic performance, and this is what makes the form so communicative and also gives it the power to be misinterpreted, misappropriated, or misused by people who have much different intentions than the original artist.

2.4 Theoretical Background of Internet Memes

Memes have grown from funny pictures to multimodal communication artifacts that are used to respond to various communicative needs (Devitska & Bryla, 2025). They must be understood in the context of media studies, semiotics, linguistics and cultural studies, as meme is a culturally informational unit that combines image, text, sound and video elements in a manner that is not found in conventional communication (Qadduri, 2026). Recent research has validated that memes have more than just entertainment value, as they have also become a form of social, political and cultural expression beyond what was originally envisioned in the creation of demotivational posters (Devitska & Bryla, 2025), and have been termed as a de facto language of the internet due to their ease of use in communicating complex concepts (Qadduri, 2026).

Memes are examples of the process of how culture is created when users share and recontextualize information, building a shared identity and collective understanding of the information even as they reinforce specific ideologies (Devitska & Bryla, 2025). The Critical discourse analysis has demonstrated that memes often carry political messages which influence attitudes and ideology. Political memes, as Kovalev (2026) states, influence collective memory and perception of global affairs, rather than simply reflecting it, as do the various other components of the meme, such as color, gesture, and text, which enhance credibility and persuade viewers (Rezeki et al., 2024). Meme meaning-making is rooted in intertextuality: the sharing of references strengthens the connection between the creator and viewer of the meme, but can also make it inaccessible to those who are not familiar with them.

Memes are also "boundary objects" that facilitate inter-cultural communication and also permit expression of individual and group identity. Memes are successful examples of participatory media production and digital communication understanding, as the analysis of memes has been proven to improve the skills of young people in media literacy (Halim & Sari, 2024; Ali & Nauman, 2026), indicating a more inclusive media production process (Huang et al., 2024). This participatory quality is what sets memes apart from previous mass media in which ownership of communication was more clearly defined: the user is no longer just a consumer, but a potential remixer, authority of communication is spread out over a much larger number of users than in traditional media.

2.5 Content Analysis Approaches and Methodological Frameworks

To analyse a meme, advanced techniques are needed that are appropriate to its multi-component nature. The most common method in meme research is content analysis, which aims to identify patterns of repetition, composition of an image, language, and ideology, usually performed at the level of text, image, and their combination (Halim & Sari, 2024; Qadduri, 2026), and is considered the most powerful method when used together with thematic analysis (Creswell, 2010).

Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen, social semiotic theory investigates how meaning is constructed with the use of visuals, typography, colour, layout and linguistic selection (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2025). The Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach can be used to analyze the interaction among the mode of language, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial to form the meaning that cannot be obtained from any single mode, and the frame analysis approach can be used to see how the memes classify information into patterns that are recognized. The integration of mixed methods in the study of meme use enhances meme research; for instance, Halim and Sari (2024) used the mixed methods approach in their study on Indonesian Gen Z meme consumption, which included survey and interview methods, to obtain data on the content of memes and the process of forming and using memes. Digital ethnography could complement these methods by examining the online context in which the memes are created, circulated, and understood. The methodological pluralism, which is found throughout this literature and is manifested in content analysis, social semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, and ethnographic interviewing, illustrates a growing acceptance of the fact that no one analytical framework is adequate to capture an object as complex as the meme, which is both textual, image, cultural reference, and social act.

2.6 Linguistic and Semiotic Properties of Memes

Memetic communication has a linguistics which is at the core of both its intent and its culture. Memes are based on different techniques, exaggeration, irony, allusion, and create humor and social commentary, but are dependent on cultural background knowledge to fully understand them (Qadduri, 2026). They also show non-standard orthography, intentional code switching and word alteration which all contribute to the creative manipulation of language in and by online communities in line with the wider research findings that suggest that the norms of language are not stable in a globalized digital communication (Ali, 2018).

Semiotically, memes are polycode texts, in which the verbal and visual components work together in complementary or contradictory ways to create meaning, and where color, graphic design, typography and visual emphasis are all key factors (Huang et al., 2024). As a result, the same images may have completely different meanings depending on their textual and social framing, as in the case of contrast, parody and visual storytelling (Halim & Sari, 2024). Another visual technique that varies by platform and audience is the use of bold on-image text, as well as simple framing, fast editing and exaggerated facial expressions, which Zhang (2025) found were common features of YouTube Shorts. Some of these memes featured realistic portrayals of scenes, while others employed 3D or glitch effects. Reading memes involves, therefore, some contextual knowledge and visual literacy, as memes are a participatory form that are familiar with digital culture and combine traditional visual principles with digitally native ones. The combination of linguistic and visual ability can help account for why comprehension of memes is so unevenly distributed across age groups and cultural backgrounds and why reading memes is not a universally accessible communicative code, but a marker of belonging to a particular generation of digital communicators.

2.7 Functional Roles and Communication Strategies

Memes are not only used for entertainment; they can also be used to make a social comment or to satirize certain topics that are not directly addressed, as they may be viewed as less risky than direct criticism (Rezeki et al., 2024). Satirical images and video memes (62% of the content analyzed), political jokes (24%) and remix culture (14%) were important in holding Kenyan politicians accountable during the 2024 Finance Bill protests, according to Akondo et al. (2026).

Emotional and psychological components of memes also played a role in coping with these situations through humor and shared understanding, offering a source of stress relief and emotional release during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2025; Ali & Ali, 2026b). They help with identity and group formation, by which users share memes to signal their group membership, cultural identity and generational belonging, and across cultures memes can be used as "bridge content" that, at times, needs to be explained, but that also contributes to intercultural understanding.

However, it is important to note that memes are now being used in education as well, far from being just a form of entertainment, they can be used to explain complex issues, simplify difficult concepts, and make learning more engaging (Younis & Amer, 2026; Ali & Ali, 2026a). Health communication has also embraced memes to deliver public health messages, as long as there is a balance between entertainment and information (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2025), and

governments and organisations have utilised memes to reach young audiences who are less engaged with traditional communications, sometimes with an underlying political agenda. The potential for the meme to communicate is greater than its roots in casual entertainment: its ability to summarize complicated concepts into one easily digestible unit means that its use as a tool to reach consumers is being embraced by institutional actors as a viable means of distribution.

2.8 Cultural Analysis of Memes

Meme analysis allows us to identify themes that are common across memes and that reflect a society's preoccupations, values and contradictions. Political memes have been extensively researched and are found to simplify political events, influence public opinion and foster political awareness or activism (Rezeki et al., 2024), and to portray leaders as responsible for solving social problems (Kovalev, 2026), who act as mental schemas and reduce complex international politics into concepts that can be easily understood by the public.

Economic and social matters, unemployment, inflation, poverty, are also common meme topics, which offer humor and criticism on everyday struggles, and religion and culture are common topics, with memes affirming or criticizing beliefs depending on the context. Globalized meme formats are being localized regularly but with national identity intact, as Halim and Sari (2024) demonstrated, Indonesian Gen Z localizing memes as identity building tools of cultural expression and critique. Another significant aspect is the representation of gender, as memes can reinforce or challenge gender norms, and the combination of text and image often carries social norms, power dynamics, and behavioral patterns (Ali & Habib, 2025). In combination, memes are a strong means of engaging in political, economic, identity and justice debates, allowing individuals, especially young people, to express opinions in a language that is accessible and engaging. This cultural breadth (political, economic, religious, and gendered) is what makes it worthwhile to consider memes less as a genre and more as a malleable communicative mode that is capable of absorbing and reflecting almost every facet of social life that is deemed worth taking seriously enough to be the subject of a joke.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

The methodology used in this study is a qualitative approach that involves a content analysis of memes and media discourse analysis to analyze the influence of memes on the daily communication of the age group of 18-35 years in Pakistan. Convergent parallel mixed-method design combines semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis of memes and allows for triangulation between the personal opinion and the textual meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The two data strands – meme corpus and interview transcripts – were collected and analyzed simultaneously but not as illustrations of each other, rather, each to check and enrich the other in the interpretation stage.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling. The sample consisted of 8 participants (18-35 years old) who actively creates and shares memes in urban areas of

Pakistan, were selected from different socio-economic backgrounds and universities, as well as WhatsApp groups and Reddit and Instagram.

3.3 Data Collection

The data was collected in the months of February-March 2026 over two phases. Memes were selected from the meme corpus, which comprised 10 popular memes (with at least 10,000 shares) from 2020-2025 from Pakistani and Indian sources (Twitter/X, Instagram pages including DesiMemes, Reddit r/Pakistan and r/India, and KnowYourMeme, with a focus on recurring themes across politics, culture, and society, and on memes depicting 2025 tensions between Pakistan and India). Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually or in person and lasted for 15-25 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

3.4 Data Analysis

The meme analysis followed the model of Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional critical discourse analysis (CDA) model which focuses on the three dimensions of the text, the production of discourse, the consumption of discourse, and the sociocultural context of discourse. Multimodal, intertextuality and power dynamics were coded in NVivo. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the interview data, which were then combined with the meme-level results. Trustworthiness was achieved through the use of an audit trail, member checks, and reflexive attention to researcher bias, with each researcher independently coding a portion of the memes and the interview excerpts and discrepancies discussed to ensure that the interpretation of each researcher did not unduly influence the coding scheme.

3.5 Ethical Procedures

Ethical clearance from the Ethical Review Committee of a private university had been obtained. Anonymity, encryption of data and the opportunity for participants to withdraw from the study were ensured in informed consent procedures, following the qualitative ethical requirements in Pakistan (Hyder et al., 2013). All the procedures were carried out in both English and Urdu.

4. RESULTS

The results of the multimodal analysis of ten memes that were spreading through Pakistani and Indo-Pakistani digital communities, and the qualitative data from eight semi-structured interviews are presented. The analysis was conducted using the five categories coding system: Textual and Linguistic Properties, Visual and Semiotic Elements, Functional Role and Intent, Thematic Analysis and Platform Affordances, supplemented by direct participant responses to the content of the meme. The text analysis in each subsection alternates between the level of the meme and participant testimony, thus enabling the text to be read alongside how the actual audience members made sense of the same text.

4.1 Textual and Linguistic Properties

Linguistic economy was the most regular structural feature, across all ten memes. Unlike the elaborate captions of other memes, the ones that we studied here focused on minimal textual

meaning, and much of the communicative burden was left to visual contrast, cultural memory, or platform context. One word or a brief clause strategically positioned, would often trigger a chain of cultural and political linkages.

Meme 1: Online Order / Delivery. Using only the labels "Online order" and "Delivery," this meme's meaning is activated entirely by the contrasting images it accompanies, a glamorized fictional female pilot beside an authentic military counterpart, read against the 2025 India-Pakistan tensions. Language functions here almost decoratively; the argument is visual, though it could not be read without the textual frame.

Meme 2: Sources. This meme weaponizes a familiar Bollywood line, roughly "Would we lie to you? Don't you trust us?", against a screenshot claiming "All Indian airbases safe: Sources." The cinematic line, persuasive because it performs sincerity, is redeployed to mock the performed sincerity of unverified online claims. Participant 1 observed: "Right now, people's straight communication feels rude. So talking in a meme way, they understood the message, they understood the assignment," underscoring why indirect strategies often land more effectively than direct critique online.

Meme 3: Random Basheer. The caption "Bro waited his whole life for this day," set against an ordinary rural man positioned as the defeater of expensive military drones, collapses the distance between everyday citizen and geopolitical actor through comic inflation. "Basheer" functions as a folkloric everyman archetype, and the mixture of internet vernacular ("Bro") with nationalist sentiment reflects the hybrid register of Pakistani digital youth culture.

Meme 4: After Eid. Written in first person, "Me facing the consequences of everything I said 'After Eid,'" this meme's mock-dramatic self-awareness drives its relatability. Participant 3 called it "a perfect combination of humour and struggle, funny and stressful both at the same time." The Eid reference transforms a globally familiar procrastination joke into something specifically South Asian and Muslim, narrowing yet deepening its resonance.

Meme 5: Too Muslim for Liberals. The chiasmic caption, "Too Muslim for liberals and too liberal for Muslims," states a contradiction without exaggeration or irony and leaves the reader to feel its weight. Rather than inviting laughter, it invites recognition, articulating an experience of ideological homelessness that formal political discourse rarely accommodates.

Meme 6: Gas Supply Tweet. A Roman Urdu tweet reading, in translation, "If there's going to be a war, it better happen before 9:15 in the morning, because that's when the gas supply cuts off," is framed by the header "Meanwhile Pakistani people" as a representative community utterance, not one individual's joke but an entire community's way of processing national crisis through the lens of daily inconvenience. Roman Urdu, the informal hybrid script Pakistani youth use for casual online communication, signals authenticity and generational specificity. Participant 2 read it as policy critique ("Government should improve the policy regarding the gas"), while Participant 8 offered a more expansive reading: "It shows that people sometimes become so used to everyday struggles that they start treating them as more important than larger issues." Both readings are simultaneously valid, which is part of what gives the meme its richness.

Meme 7: Batting, Bowling, Fielding and Speaking English. A verified-account tweet lists cricket categories before subverting the pattern with "speaking English" as a fourth criterion.

The joke relies on the reader's internalized rhythm of cricket discourse; the unexpected fourth item lands precisely because the first three were so credibly framed. Participant 7 refused its colonial logic directly: "It kind of feeds into a colonial mindset that knowing English makes you superior... it just keeps an annoying stereotype alive."

Meme 8: Politician vs. Cricketer. In this two-panel dialogue, conducted entirely in Roman Urdu, a politician claims "We had won the war, you couldn't even win the match," and a cricketer retorts, "Ours comes live, sir, you can't lie in that." Rather than disputing the war claim directly, the meme invokes the transparency of live sport, letting the reader draw the conclusion, characteristic of what Rezeki et al. (2024) term de-legitimization through humor: the meme does not say the politician is lying, it simply constructs a contrast that lets the reader arrive at that conclusion independently.

Meme 9: Stressed Cricket Fan. The caption, roughly "Honestly, we should have just kept the war going, at least that wouldn't have been this stressful," is deliberately absurd yet emotionally accurate for its audience. Participant 5 noted: "the people of Pakistan have not been serious during the war but they are way more serious during the cricket match," an acute, self-aware observation about the community's own emotional priorities.

Meme 10: Xavier Uncle Tweet. Structurally identical to Meme 7, this tweet elevates English proficiency to a national performance metric alongside batting, bowling, and fielding, drawing on colonial histories linking language to civilizational status. Participant 7 again resisted: "It completely tries to downplay our talent. It's basically saying, sure you have talent, but we have better English." Together, Memes 7 and 10 show how memes can operate simultaneously as cricket banter and as vehicles for ideological claims rendered palatable, and therefore more insidious, by humor.

4.2 Visual and Semiotic Elements

Applying Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic framework, three dominant visual strategies emerged: semiotic opposition, embodied affect, and platform-as-semiotic-resource, often deployed in combination.

Semiotic opposition, the deliberate juxtaposition of contrasting visual registers, organized Memes 1, 3, and 8. In Meme 1, glamorized cinematography is set against unadorned military realism; in Meme 3, an ordinary rural setting is juxtaposed with the implied sophistication of the drones supposedly defeated, encoding ideas about authenticity, grassroots power, and the limits of elite technology, consistent with Hassan et al.'s (2023) account of visual semiotics deployed for ideological purposes.

Embodied affect, conveyed through facial expression, posture, and body language, dominated Memes 5 and 9. The subject of Meme 5, formally dressed against a dark background with a restrained expression, communicates ideological displacement without exaggeration; the stark background removes contextual distraction, forcing attention onto expression itself. Meme 9 achieves a similar effect through a single image of a stressed cricket fan, hands on hips, rigid posture, set against a stadium of Pakistani flags. As Huang et al. (2024) observe, such polycode texts produce meanings neither visual nor verbal elements could achieve alone.

The text-only Memes 7 and 10 also showed that the interface itself was a semiotic resource: The verified badge, the "Xavier Uncle" persona, and the confident declarative writing of the tweets were all cues that set readers up for content to be taken as authoritative before comedic subversion kicks in, which is a critical part of the joke's mechanics. The credibility architecture of the interface, the Twitter/X network, would not be enough to build tension; rather, its own visual conventions are part of the meme's semiotic toolkit, not a neutral container for it.

4.3 Functional Roles and Communication Strategies

None of the ten memes served a single communicative function; all operated across multiple registers simultaneously, distinguishing meme communication from more conventional public discourse forms.

The six memes most connected to the 2025 geopolitical context (Memes 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10) were all political satire and social commentary. These memes were consistent with the work of Rezeki et al. (2024) who described memes as de-legitimization tools, with Meme 2 questioning the epistemological basis of social media conflict reporting, Meme 8 contrasting political spin with the verifiable transparency of live sport, and Memes 7 and 10 using cricket banter to surface colonial hierarchies of language and culture that formal political discourse struggles to address without appearing petty or overly academic.

Emotional release and coping were concentrated in Memes 4, 6, and 9, which named shared stresses, academic overload, utility shortages, the anguish of cricket spectatorship, and converted them into collective humor. As Participant 3 put it: "We procrastinate and then cry later on, funny and stressful both at the same time, that makes it even more funny." This dynamic mirrors what Wu and Fitzgerald (2025) identified in health crisis communication: accurate naming of stress implies shared experience, and shared experience implies one is not alone.

Cultural identity expression ran beneath all ten memes and was primary in Memes 4 and 5. Meme 4 inserted a universally recognizable procrastination format into Eid, while making it intelligible only to Muslim South Asians; Meme 5 expressed the identity tension of those who inhabit a middle ground between religious conservatism and secular liberalism, one that communal acknowledgment formal discourse rarely provides.

4.4 Thematic Analysis: Dominant Societal Themes

Four themes emerged across the dataset, often intertwined in the same meme: geopolitical competition and armed conflict; distrust of institutions and skepticism of news media; quotidian socio-economic conflict; and identity politics and polarization; all of which highlight the anxieties about governance, infrastructure, identity, and information credibility that preceded the tensions of 2025.

The majority of the corpus, namely Memes 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, were saturated by geopolitical rivalry, which was expressed in registers from the playful consumer-culture joke of Meme 1 to the sharper critique of Meme 8, and the colonial-linguistic commentary of Memes 7 and 10. Institutional distrust was most evident in Meme 2, 6 and 8 where ordinary citizens or institutions like sport were seen as more credible than official channels, Participant 8 noted about Meme 6: "Even though it's funny, it still spreads awareness about social and utility issues

in society. In Kenya's case of protests over the Finance Bill, Akondo et al. (2026) discovered the same phenomenon: humor as a medium for and not an alternative to political engagement.

Everyday socio-economic struggle appeared directly in Memes 4 and 6 and implicitly in Meme 9. The gas-supply joke of Meme 6 places a domestic utility shortage alongside an imminent war, quietly asking whose crisis counts. There were some memes which exhibited identity politics, and others which did not, but Meme 5 was explicit, and the cricket-politics memes were implicit in this sense: "even from Pakistan and India, they had different language, different culture... but still they can communicate easily with the memes" (Participant 6). The four themes that are all present in a 10-meme corpus are all compressed and economical: a single image and a few words can index a geopolitical conflict, a domestic infrastructural failure, an institutional credibility gap, and a question of religious/ national belonging.

4.5 Platform Affordances and Digital Circulation

The ten memes were spread mostly on Twitter/X, Instagram, and WhatsApp, all of which offer unique affordances that influenced the form of the memes and the conditions of reception. Twitter/X memes (7 and 10) used the credibility architecture of the tweet format, the verified badge, public username, confident tone, to set up and subvert the expectations; their simplicity made it easy to migrate to other platforms without changes. The memes found on Instagram (1, 3, 5) were based on the viscosity of the content and the contrast of sentiment, which were the factors that would make them more shareable in the algorithm-driven feeds. Meme culture was the business of WhatsApp, and existed in a separate logic as well (4, 6, 9): person-to-person or in closed groups, with a different criterion: intimacy, not virality.

Participant 7 articulated the comparative advantage of the meme format: "Traditional news keeps things formal and factual, but memes are like street banter. They spread like wildfire because they are catchy... it gets the message across way faster than any formal sports article ever could." This aligns with Zulli and Zulli's (2022) concept of imitation publics, communities organized around shared cultural reference and emotional orientation rather than formal institutional identity, sustained through viral circulation.

4.6 Participant Interview Findings

Interview participants demonstrated sophisticated interpretive capacities, actively negotiating meme meaning rather than receiving it passively, and at times pushing back critically against the ideological frames memes constructed.

Relatability was the quality most consistently cited as the basis of meme effectiveness, functioning as the mechanism through which memes perform community-building work. Participant 8 explained: "Gas shortage and load shedding are common problems in Pakistan... This is what makes the meme meaningful and funny at the same time." For participants, "meaningful" and "funny" were not competing qualities but mutually reinforcing ones.

Interviews also surfaced generational differences in meme literacy. Participant 6 observed that older generations "might not interpret and understand it as accurately as we understand," reflecting the broader media literacy landscape identified by Devitska and Bryla (2025), in which meme fluency is a culturally specific competency built through sustained digital participation rather than a universal skill.

The most analytically significant finding was Participant 7's critical resistance to Memes 7 and 10, naming their colonial-linguistic framing directly rather than receiving them as innocent cricket banter. This active, sometimes critical, reading position is key to the understanding of the true dynamics of communication found in online meme culture, and it is also important because it contradicts any theory of the meme circulation that views its audiences as a uniform mass of passive consumers being fed a message that is simply whatever the meme happens to have.

5. DISCUSSION

So, during the period of active tension between two nuclear-armed neighbours, millions of people decided to deal with this tension mostly on the basis of jokes. The memes examined in this work are not simply 'trivial' cultural relics, but rather 'primary sites of meaning-making, community formation, and political communication' for a generation that 'came of age on social media. This discussion places the findings in the context of existing scholarship, discusses the three research objectives and reflects upon the importance of meme communication in the context of Pakistan.

5.1 Memes as Genuine Communicative Artifacts, Not Mere Entertainment

The most basic finding of the study is that contrary to popular belief, memes are not primarily entertainment and only secondly communicative. In all 10 memes, the humorous aspect was a vehicle for substantive content, political criticism, identity affirmation, social commentary, emotional processing, but not content itself—the meme is funny because it is substantive, and substantive because it is funny, and no one can tell which is which.

The discovery further supports the argument of Lestari et al. (2024) that memes are not just about entertainment, but also political messages, stereotypes, resistance, and public opinion. The argument is especially compelling in Pakistan, where a large percentage of the youth, urban and connected, get their political information and process their collective anxiety mainly through social media. The application of multimodal discourse analysis (Halim & Sari, 2024) confirmed that meaning emerges from the interaction of multiple simultaneous modes, textual, visual, cultural, intertextual, and platform-architectural, rather than from any single element: in Meme 2, the Bollywood dialogue, the tweet screenshot, and the audience's geopolitical knowledge are mutually dependent, and removing any one layer collapses the meme. The form is multimodal and this is not a complication when analysis. It also gives a reason why memes don't get the same kind of single channel content moderation as text or images do: the political message of the meme might be in the relationship between the layers, not in any one layer that an automated filter could detect.

5.2 Humor as a Technology of Political Critique

Of the ten memes, six directly addressed the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict and in each instance did so in a humorous way, in a way that is both shareable and deniable, and also emotionally compelling.

Meme 8 does this very clearly: it positions a politician's unverifiable war statement, alongside a cricketer's call to live sport's clear authority, to make a pointed statement of the lack of honesty in institutions without naming any individual. This is what Rezeki et al. (2024) call de-

legitimization through humor, and what Akondo et al.'s (2026) research on the accountability of political memes in Kenya reveals, a form of critique that is both more pointed and more accessible to those who would not tune into a formal editorial.

The self-deprecating nature of Meme 6, in which Pakistanis laugh at their gas shortages rather than at another country, is an important nuance: self-deprecating humour is not meant to deflect critique, but to shift it inwards to the structural issue of gas shortages as it affects ordinary Pakistanis, sometimes evoking a quieter but no less pointed dissatisfaction than in-poinkered satire. When the same material is presented as a demand for accountability, as in the case of "self-deprecating national humor," which is often interpreted as fatalism, it implies a subtle yet persistent message that institutions should do better, and Participant 2's response to this is a good example.

5.3 Cultural Identity and the Boundaries of Meme Legibility

The results demonstrate that memes are powerful vehicles for cultural identity expression and community formation, but also reveal that this community-forming capacity is inseparable from a boundary-drawing capacity: the same features that make a meme deeply resonant for one audience render it partially illegible to another.

Meme 4 illustrates this clearly: the procrastination joke is globally legible, while the "After Eid" marker narrows the audience to Muslim South Asians, particularly students, precisely the mechanism through which the meme performs its identity function, consistent with Halim and Sari's (2024) account of memes as identity-making tools that name culturally specific shared experience. Meme 5 is a different kind of boundary, one that lies between the ideologies of the same community, rather than between different nationalities or religions, and an experience that is not directly acknowledged in Pakistani digital discourse, but rather as a form of social acknowledgment. The intertextuality of Bollywood, cricket, consumer culture, and colonial linguistic history of the corpus validates Qadduri's (2026) claim that "intertextual reference makes meme communication meaningful to those who share it and alienating to those who do not", as it is clear that the very same mechanisms that make a meme appear intimate, immediate, and humorous to its intended audience are what make it opaque, or simply unfunny, to anyone outside that frame of reference.

5.4 The Cricket-Politics Interface and Collective Emotion

The level to which cricket is the main medium of geopolitical tension, national identity and institutional critique is processed is one of the most culturally specific finding in the study. Four memes (7, 8, 9, and 10) feature the cricket as the frame, not at random, but because cricket is the context in which the rivalry between India and Pakistan is played most publicly and emotionally, where national feeling is most allowed and widely felt.

This is particularly true of Meme 9, which compares a cricket match to real war, and finds this ridiculous yet emotionally true for their audience. Participant 5's reading, that Pakistanis were "way more serious during the cricket match" than during the war itself, identifies something real about the relationship between collective emotion, national politics, and spectator sport. Denisova (2019) argues that political memes function as coping mechanisms during national tension; the cricket memes here support that claim with an important qualification, that they do not merely express pre-existing feeling but actively construct and consolidate it. Kovalev

(2026) makes a parallel point: political memes shape understanding of global affairs by influencing collective memory and perception rather than simply representing reality, meaning that even ostensibly light cricket-politics memes are doing genuine cultural and political work, shaping not only how the conflict is remembered afterward but how the rival nation and one's own community are imagined in the process.

5.5 What the Findings Mean for Understanding Pakistani Digital Communication

This study contributes to a comparatively thin body of literature on Pakistani digital communication, most existing meme scholarship being Western-centric or focused on other Global South contexts such as Indonesia, Kenya, or India. The findings from other contexts cannot be directly transferred to Pakistan because of its unique characteristics, the use of Urdu by the Romans, the unique nature of the Indian-Pakistan conflict, the socio-economic pressures of load-shedding and gas shortages, and the unique nature of Muslims in a post-colonial state.

The results indicate that Pakistani digital meme culture is not just a local copy of the global formats but is also a local practice of cultural remixing, where the global templates are re-contextualized in a specifically Pakistani cultural, linguistic, historical, and geopolitical context, in line with Shifman's (2021) description of meme culture as being both global in form and local in use. What is described elsewhere in the 2025 tensions is described in other places by Shifman (2021): meme production surges when there is collective anxiety, as it becomes one of the main places where communities cope with events official discourse considers too dangerous or too complex to articulate directly. Finally, the interview data speaks to media literacy. Participant 7's naming of the colonial logic in Meme 10 reflects critical interpretive capacity built through sustained engagement with meme culture itself, supporting Halim and Sari's (2024) and Ali and Nauman's (2026) argument that meme analysis contributes to youth media literacy, and suggesting that formal media literacy education in Pakistan could engage meme culture as a resource rather than a problem to be managed. Curricula that treat meme reading as a legitimate analytical skill, alongside more conventional forms of textual and visual literacy, would build on a competency that young Pakistanis are already developing informally, rather than competing against it or dismissing it as a frivolous distraction from serious learning.

5.6 Summary

The findings and discussion as a whole present meme communication as a true and rich form of public discourse, which is of a specific cultural nature and has a structured nature. In the Pakistani context, and in this more emotional and political geopolitical moment of 2025, memes were not a barrier to serious communication, but serious communication itself, in a register of Pakistani digital youth, who have collectively developed this language to communicate with their social, political, and emotional realities; funny enough to share, honest enough to resonate, oblique enough to navigate, and layered enough to repay close reading. It's no small feat for a communication medium that, at first glance, is composed of just an image and a few words.

5.7 Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. The purposive sample of eight participants, while sufficient for the interpretive depth a qualitative design requires, cannot represent the full diversity of Pakistani digital meme audiences across rural-urban, class, and regional lines. The

ten-meme corpus is picked because it has a connection to the ongoing India-Pakistan tensions, and highlights politically charged content which may not reflect the actual, more mundane uses of memes that consume a significant portion of users' time spent scrolling. Lastly, due to the acute geopolitical tension at the time of data collection, the results could be the result of a crisis-related intensification of meme production and engagement with politics, and not the baseline of the everyday communication of memes, which would be more representative of a calmer political climate; this would help to determine which patterns are consistent features of meme culture in Pakistan and which are ephemeral by-products of the particular period studied.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined memes as a contemporary medium of communication amongst Pakistanis, by analysing ten memes which took place in the background of 2025 geopolitics of India-Pakistan, along with eight semi-structured interviews. The research methodology employed was multimodal and critical discourse analysis, which was used to examine the role of memes as communicative objects and their circulation to unveil insight into the digital culture of Pakistan, collective sense-making, and public discourse.

The main result challenges the widespread idea that memes are nothing more than entertainment that has a communicative purpose as an incidental. Rather, humour serves as a vehicle for substantive material, political criticism, identity, social criticism and emotion, not as the material itself: memes are funny because they are substantive; substantive because they are funny. Humor is a technology of political critique where multiple communicative strategies operate together in harmony, a register that is also shareable, deniable and affective, rather than any single one, and where meaning does not exist independent from, but is rather produced by, multiple communicative strategies working in unison, textual, visual, cultural, intertextual, and platform-architectural. This quality allows memes to function effectively in contentious geopolitical moments where direct political language carries social and professional risk; far from softening critique, humor sharpens it by reaching audiences who would not engage a formal editorial on the same subject.

Memes also function as effective mechanisms of cultural identity expression and community formation, with their community-building capacity inseparable from their boundary-making capacity, a feature of the form rather than a weakness. Pakistanis draw on culturally specific elements, Eid, Roman Urdu, cricket culture, and the colonial history of language, that both include and exclude audiences, enabling in-group recognition. Cricket emerged as a particularly significant means of coping with geopolitical tension, its emotional stakes for this community no less significant than those of war for others; political memes do not merely reflect existing emotion but actively construct it, shaping how communities feel about conflict, rival nations, and themselves. This finding carries clear educational implications, supporting the claim that meme analysis contributes to youth media literacy and suggesting that Pakistani media literacy education could productively treat meme culture as a resource rather than a problem to manage.

This study is a contribution to the relatively scarce literature on practices of digital communication in Pakistani online spaces, in which meme-making is a form of cultural remixing: globally circulating templates are appropriated from specific Pakistani cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical reference points, and are speeded up during moments of collective

anxiety when official discourse cannot accommodate direct articulation. Further research could focus on studying meme culture over defined political eras, on comparative studies of meme use in other South Asian online communities, and on a more in-depth examination of the role of institutional actors as they use memes, as well as the study of misinformation, algorithmic curation, and gendered patterns of meme production and consumption. One thing that is clear: for a generation that has grown up on social media, memes are a fundamental component of public discourse and their ongoing study is vital to understanding how public communication works in contemporary societies, how it is used to deal with conflict, and how it is used to hold institutions, however indirectly, to account.

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