

Memes as a Mirror of Society: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Pakistani Memes Culture

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Abstract

In this digital age, where social media has become the major communication platform, memes are a powerful medium to reflect and shape societal narratives. This study aims to analyze the role of these digital artifacts as a means of social commentary in Pakistan. This study analyzes the multimodality of memes acting as political satire, cultural identity, economic crisis, and the community's social practices and preferences through Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic model. The data collected for this study is 80 memes created and circulated in 2024, classified into various dimensions of Pakistani society, such as political, sociocultural, economic, religious, educational, etc. The qualitative analysis reveals how memes reflect, critique, and challenge the power dynamics within society. The findings reveal that memes are not only a source of entertainment but also address society's serious and worth-noticing problems under the mask of humour. Furthermore, the significance of this study lies in its critical contribution to understanding digital communication. The research calls for attention to the harsh realities of society and suggests that a positive change in society would help to better portray the Pakistani community around the globe.

Keywords: multimodal critical discourse analysis, Pakistani memes culture, social commentary, Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic model, power dynamics

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Introduction

In this digital era, social media has become unavoidable and is used frequently by even a man in the street. People share information through various platforms and are influenced by such means of knowledge. One of the most commonly shared media of information and entertainment is memes. Memes are used for entertainment and fun and provide social commentary for the region it is created within. Whether a society is advancing or declining, good or evil, memes represent it as it is in the guise of humour. That is why memes are termed as the mirror of society.

In our Pakistani society, people try to find humorous aspects of every situation to avoid the harshness of reality. However, this attitude also impacts their lives, perceptions, and psychology. Memes not only present the negative side of society but also the overall sociocultural practices. This study explores social representation through memes and their role in reflecting or challenging the predominant perspectives within society.

Definitions and Background of Study

The term “meme” was first introduced by Dawkins (2006) in 1976 in his book “The Selfish Gene” for the cultural evolution and transmission over the internet as the biological genes replicate. Distin (2005) defined memes as informational units that represent cultures with the help of language, while Chandler (2013) called memes “sociocultural artifacts”. Similarly, Milner’s (2012) definition focused on the multimodality and semiotics of memes, frequently circulated by various participants on social media platforms to create some alterations in sociocultural discourses.

In addition, Davidson (2009) states that memes are part of a culture that is “typically a joke” and has some influence on the masses via online replication. On the other hand, Putra and Triyono (2016) considered memes as “culture makers” reflecting “cultural backgrounds”. Shifman (2014) claims that memes share “common characteristics of content, form, and stance” produced by intertextuality, i.e., awareness of each other. They are “circulated, imitated and transformed via internet” by social media users according to the situational context.

Furthermore, Laineste and Voolaid (2016) described the ability of memes to integrate text with images to convey the intended meanings. Likewise, Olszewska and Koczorowics (2019) talked about the “conceptual blend,” that is, the perception of memes by the receivers by connecting various interpretations. All these definitions demonstrate the reflecting nature of memes as a source of information combining various modes and having the power to influence and change ideologies.

Today, with the spread of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., memes have become well-recognized and frequently shared digital items. In Pakistan, memes reflect the diverse sociocultural and political landscape to reinforce or challenge the power dynamics in society. They spread awareness, shape public opinions of various social issues, and present a picture of society to outsiders by capturing the social practices and ideologies of the society.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to assess the social representation of memes by integrating multimodality, i.e., text and visuals, how they combine to create the overall meaning conveyed by the meme, and how they reflect or challenge the power dynamics and predominant narratives that prevailed in the society, using Van Leeuwen’s (2005) Social Semiotic theory. Therefore, memes are viewed as tools for social commentary, political satire, economic critique, and portrayal of religious beliefs to raise community engagement in contemporary Pakistani society.

Statement of the Problem

Despite significant studies on social commentary through memes, a comprehensive study of various aspects of society demonstrated through memes is needed to present an overall image of Pakistani society. Previous studies mostly discussed the political or social issues of Pakistani society with a limited scope; however, this study is meant to reflect all the prominent perspectives and interests of the contemporary Pakistani public.

Significance of the Study

The current study is significant for its contribution to the growing field of study of digital communication, particularly meme analysis in Pakistan. Moreover, it provides a comprehensive

study of Pakistani society as represented through memes. It also provides information to anthropologists and sociologists to look at new and reliable aspects of knowledge of social practices in the guise of entertainment. Moreover, the framework used in this research, Van Leeuwen's social semiotic model, indicates the shift of the traditional discourse towards multimodal discourse studies by integrating the visual and textual elements encoded in memes. Furthermore, the influence of memes on reflecting, reinforcing, or challenging the dominant socio-political, economic, and religious ideologies and power dynamics that prevailed in society is explored in this research.

Besides, this study will help to understand the importance of memes, beyond laughter and amusement, as an addresser of serious and attention-worthy social topics. This will promote digital literacy among the youth and help them understand the various uses and purposes of memes, especially their significance in understanding the complexities of modern life. It also highlights the need for an effective change in society to present a more positive image of the nation in front of the world.

Delimitations

This study is focused only on the image macros memes circulating on various digital media platforms, i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and also shared on WhatsApp in the year 2024 to examine the current situations prevailing in Pakistani society. Among various other entertainment-focused memes, only those related to Pakistani circumstances, such as social, political, cultural, religious, educational, and others, are selected. In this way, 80 memes are analyzed in this research. These memes are analyzed by Van Leeuwen's (2005) Social Semiotic theory, targeting visual and textual elements to cover multimodality, social context and practice, power dynamics and ideology, legitimation, and meaning construction. In this way, the social representation through memes can be studied along with the power dynamics involved in the production and influence of memes.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Investigate how memes encode social representations in Pakistani memes by integrating text and images
2. Explore the power dynamics reflected or challenged by memes

Research Questions

The current research answers the following questions:

1. How are social representations encoded in Pakistani memes by integrating text and images?
2. How do these memes reflect or challenge power dynamics within society?

Research Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that memes shape public perception by serving as a tool for social commentary. This popular culture reflects, reinforces, and humorously challenges the predominant narratives in Pakistani society. The findings should expose a complex interplay between social representation and power dynamics to establish a societal discourse. Therefore, the study aims to identify the significance of social media memes conveying important information about the society they are created within, with the help of Van Leeuwen's (2005) Social Semiotic theory.

Literature Review

Memes have been analyzed through semiotics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to reveal their communicative and ideological functions. Following is the critical evaluation of the existing literature on political and social representation and psychological influences of memes:

Memes as Sociocultural Commentary

Memes are the source of reflecting social circumstances, cultural identities, and narratives. Amir (2021) investigated the functions of memes beyond humour. The study states

that memes are significant in advertising, community formation, and propaganda. Moreover, they shape ideologies and sociocultural norms in the society within which they are produced.

Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2024) focused on viral Pakistani memes to identify their reflected ideologies. Through the multimodal discourse analysis, the study underscored the religion, language, and national pride demonstrated by memes. Findings revealed that memes address serious social issues hidden under the cover of humour. So, memes have the strength of unity and polarization in society.

The above study resonates with Moaswes's (2019) findings, which stated that memes express society and bridge generational and literacy gaps. The study was conducted to explore memes' impacts, particularly in South Asian contexts. Therefore, memes unify society in digital, generational, and literacy realms.

Meanwhile, Qureshi et al. (2023) investigated the sociological features of memes in both Urdu and English. The study used Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor, and the findings revealed that Urdu memes are more relevant to Pakistani society due to their cultural resonance. In contrast, English memes lack this relevance despite being globally accessible. Thus, language is also associated closely with culture and social values.

Correspondingly, Rasool (2024) employed Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony theory to investigate how memes present traditional and modern societal realms. The study claimed that a more hybrid culture in Pakistan is created due to the integration of local and global cultures in various aspects, e.g., music, fashion, digitalization, etc.

Memes as Political Commentary

In their study, Javed et al., (2022) used Kress's framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to investigate Pakistan's social and political representation through social media memes. This framework helped to identify the implicit meanings encoded in memes. They argued that memes not only serve for comic and humorous effects but also shape public opinion by emphasizing the tensions of society. The memes they analyzed criticized politicians, government policies, and social norms. The study revealed the impact of such memes

on youth and other citizens accessing social media and how such social representations influence them.

Likewise, Adebomi (2020) observed memes portraying individuals and institutions under the administration of President Buhari in Nigeria. She employed Fairclough and Van Leeuwen's models to demonstrate how memes criticized the Nigerian administration negatively under the influence of Buhari's leadership. She claimed that this scenario's memes reflected the public's dissatisfaction with government policies.

Similarly, Saleem et al., (2022) analyzed the political memes created during the no-confidence movement in Pakistan. Their study identified political biases and unethical representations in memes. Many of the memes appeared to support PTI's narrative and criticize PDM, crossing ethical boundaries and having a bad impact, showing scornful attitudes against political ideologies.

Another study on political memes by Sultana and Khalid (2023) focused on ideological representations in the Pakistani context using the Digital Genre Theory. They studied how memes reflect and reinforce political ideologies or trigger critical thinking in public according to political affiliations. According to them, memes provide awareness of political situations and promote ideological polarization.

Sultana, Batool, and Akhtar (2023) studied the impact of Pakistani political memes on youth and how such memes shape their perceptions. For this purpose, they conducted a Likert scale questionnaire survey and collected responses from 200 university students in Narowal. The findings reveal that political memes ignite the youth against government policies and manipulate their opinions.

Semiotic Analysis and Multimodal Communication

Mubarak and Aayid (2022) analyzed the political memes regarding Donald Trump semiotically using Kress and Van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory piloted with Dian's model of colour analysis. They argued that memes convey politically charged ideologies by integrating text and visuals. They found satire and parody in the memes related to Donald Trump, emphasizing the public's critical responses to his administration in a humorous manner.

Rezeki et al., (2024) use a similar framework. They investigated semiotic representations of memes and the (de)legitimization strategies used in memes regarding the Indonesian Presidential Elections in 2024. The findings revealed the function of memes as political tools, using humour and irony to criticize political ideologies and leaders and to shape public perceptions.

Comparatively, Wagener (2023) used a large sample size of more than 2000 memes to explore the semiotic significance of memes. He claimed that memes that convey racist or anti-feminist opinions promote hatred and a sense of social violence. The findings reveal that humour drives the offensive content in a lighter mood.

Nita et al., (2021) also conducted research on memes semiotically by employing Van Leeuwen's (2005) semiotic theory and speech act theory by Bach and Harnish (1980). They examined various speech acts performed by memes, i.e., constative and directive illocutionary acts, by integrating modes, media, and meaning potential as semiotic resources.

Psychological Impact of Memes

While most researchers focused on the social and political commentary through memes, Ayyaz et al., (2022) investigated the psychological impacts of memes, particularly those resulting in psychological distress. By employing Fairclough's CDA model, they analyzed how memes mock public figures and common people, contributing to anxiety and distress. Researchers argued that memes can act as an instrument of cyber harassment and destroy someone's social life and mental peace. In this way, memes are not only a source of humour but also a dangerous tool with very negative psychological impacts. The study, therefore, highlights the necessity of some ethical considerations to reduce such psychological impacts.

Memos and Social Violence

The harmful impacts of memes are not only restricted to psychological distress, but they can also cause social violence. Wagener (2023), in his study discussed above, addressed this issue explicitly. His findings reveal that memes that promote hate speech use humour as a disguise to hide harmful intentions. This notion is also represented by Moussa et al., (2020), who explored the way memes target marginalized groups using the mask of entertainment in the boycott campaign in Morocco in 2018, using Fairclough's (1992, 2003) CDA model and Kress

and Van Leeuwen's (2006) framework with the integration of de Certeau's (1984) theory of everyday life practice. The findings revealed that the marginalized community uses memes to challenge the dominant power dynamics.

Shahid et al., (2021) employed multimodal CDA to investigate linguistically and visually women's representation through memes in Pakistani society. They found that the negative portrayal of women in Pakistani memes reinforces stereotypes like irrational, talkative, troublesome, self-centred, and the object of amusement.

Sexist humour represented by memes is also studied by Paul (2023) while investigating gender ideologies under the COVID-19 lockdown in India. The study revealed how women are objectified and mocked for their appearance and reproductive roles. Men's participation and gender-based stereotypes also ridicule their engagement in domestic chores more than on normal days.

Economic Crisis and Memes

Memes also highlight the economic issues of society, as Raza et al., (2023) mentioned in their study, exploring the dark side of Pakistani society. They highlighted the economic crisis through memes by employing Fairclough's CDA model. The results showed the hidden meanings conveyed through memes influencing public perception and awareness regarding serious economic issues criticizing government policies. Their devastating impacts on youth are also discussed in the study.

Harbo (2022) also explored the role played by memes in the Rethinking Economics movement to challenge conventional economics, employing Shifman's (2014) framework for memes and Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategy. The findings revealed that memes can challenge the traditional economic perspective and reinforce the alternative ones through knowledge production and identity construction.

Religious Representations in Memes

On religion, Bellar et al., (2013) investigated the role of memes in expressing or critiquing religious beliefs. This case study approach used the online audience analysis to focus

on the visual and narrative analysis of religious memes. The findings revealed how religious memes convey religious meanings online.

Another significant study conducted by Rathi and Jain (2023) explored how religion and ethical values are spreading through memes. The study employed a deep list framework analysis of meme characteristics. The results showed that memes may also cause misinterpretations and ethical concerns besides fostering religious beliefs.

Impacts of Memes across Borders

Memes cannot be understood only within the society they represent; they can also be intelligible across different cultures, as demonstrated in Laineste's (2016) study exploring how memes are adapted and modified by various cultures and the role played by intertextuality in this process. The study found the integration of local and global cultures, focusing on the intertextuality and complexity of content.

Another study conducted by Chandler (2013) addressed the global inequality and economic imbalance represented by memes regarding First World Problems (FWP) and Third World Success (TWS). The study examined the societal discourse that reinforced or challenged the notion of first and third worlds. Through Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotics, he found that the FWP memes exaggerate their minor financial problems. In contrast, the TWS memes represent their major, serious issues more lightly and comically. This attitude maintains the binary opposition of first and third worlds.

The study conducted by Abbas et al., (2024) explores a comparative analysis of Pakistani and Indian memes. Through a qualitative content analysis framework, the study revealed that although both these countries have similar cultural roots, their national identities differ due to ideological expressions. The findings showed that memes shape the cultural narratives in both countries, but the ideologies differ considerably.

The gap in Literature and Rationale for Current Study

Despite such significant existing studies, there is a noticeable gap in the literature, which would be the rationale for this current study. Most past studies focused on memes specific to a single sociocultural aspect, event, or individual. Moreover, there is more prominence on the

negativity represented through memes instead of a general objective analysis of social representation that could be either positive or negative. The lack of cross-platform analysis is also a limitation of previous research, as most memes were taken from a single platform. In Pakistani research, the sample size is very small, making it difficult to generalize the findings. Additionally, the random sampling technique is used in this research.

To fill these gaps, the current study analyzes how memes represent Pakistani society in every aspect, including politics, society, culture, religion, family system, interests, education, language, climate, etc., and how memes act as multimodal discourse tools. This study is not specific to a particular event or individual, allowing it to present a more general analysis of social representation by memes. Moreover, the sample size is larger than that of previous Pakistani meme studies and was taken from multiple platforms. The purposive sampling technique is used to have a clear data organization and analysis aligned with the purpose of the study. In this way, this study presents a comprehensive understanding of memes as a mirror of society.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study used a *qualitative research design* to critically evaluate the nuanced meanings conveyed through memes regarding social issues and practices for the multimodal critical discourse analysis of memes. Moreover, the multimodal analysis helped to explain how various modes, i.e., text and visuals, reinforce each other's meaning and how these meanings are justified in a particular context. Khan (2024) has also used such a research design for the multimodal analysis of Pakistani political memes. However, in this study, the analysis explores the memes related to other dimensions of society.

Data Collection

The data collected for this study includes 80 memes representing various aspects of Pakistani society. For this purpose, many memes were collected from various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and shared on WhatsApp. A few memes were also taken from Google. All these memes were created in 2024, portraying this particular

period's social conditions. Later, memes relevant to the Pakistani sociocultural context were selected, and others were discarded. Only the image macros memes, i.e., those integrating pictures and text, were considered for a multimodal analysis during this selection. This provided a total of 80 memes for analysis. Those memes were found to reflect either social practice or criticize the dominant narratives of the authoritative institutions of Pakistan.

Sampling

After data collection, a *purposive sampling technique* was used to select the memes related to the Pakistani context only and to classify the selected (80) memes into the following categories:

- i. Political memes (10 memes)
- ii. Sociocultural memes (7 memes)
- iii. Economic memes (14 memes)
- iv. Religious memes (8 memes)
- v. Cricket-related memes (6 memes)
- vi. Family-related memes (12 memes)
- vii. Educational memes (8 memes)
- viii. Language-related memes (6 memes)
- ix. Climate-related memes (9 memes)

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Theo Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic Model presented in his book "Introducing Social Semiotics" (2005), which presents a comprehensive framework for Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis drawn upon Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This model focuses on how meanings are constructed and can be negotiated through multimodality, i.e., integrating various modes, such as images, texts, audio, or nonverbal cues etc., within a particular context. It also discusses how semiotic resources construct social realities and power relations. Therefore, the key elements of this model are as follows:

Discourse Context

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Meaning can be understood only in a particular context, so this model emphasizes the social, cultural, historical, political, and other types of context that influence the creation and understanding of multimodal discourse.

Analysis of Modes

This model focuses on semiotic resources or modes such as gestures, colours, images, fonts, and text to analyze their function in meaning-making.

Intermodal Relationships

Multimodality is the integration of different modes. Intermodal relationships highlight the combined effects of all the modes in meaning construction and how they reinforce each other's ideas.

Genre and Social Practice

This framework represents the genre of discourse, the social practices of who is doing what, how, and why, and whether it challenges or legitimates the power dynamics within society.

Power and Ideology

It also examines the power structures and ideologies being practiced and reflected or challenged by the multimodal discourse. This includes the prioritization or marginalization of certain voices within society.

Overall Meanings Construction or Findings Synthesis

Finally, all the above insights help in the overall meaning construction of the multimodal discourse conveyed by the images, text, audio, videos, or gestures together within specific contexts.

Since memes are one of the most common examples of multimodal text, this framework helped analyze the meanings hidden in text and images used in memes to convey specific meanings, social practices represented in them, and the power dynamics reflected through the selected memes, critically. Previous studies which employed this model for memes analysis are Nita et al., (2021) worked on semiotic analysis of internet memes and Rezeki, Sagala, and

Rabukit's (2024) research for investigation of (de)legitimization strategies used in Indonesian political memes, among others. In the Pakistani context, this framework for meme analysis has very limited application. So, this study is intended to fill this gap.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of memes, Van Leeuwen's social semiotic model focuses on the semiotics and multimodality of memes and the construction of their meaning. A qualitative discussion is created to deconstruct the hidden meanings of the memes. The main focus was to reveal how these memes represent Pakistani society and the attitudes of the public and social institutions. Moreover, an objective and unbiased analysis method highlights both positive and negative aspects of the researcher's impartial discussion. In this way, positivity is appreciated, and negativity is criticized, lacking in most of the previous research on memes.

Ethical Considerations

As no individual participants are involved in this study, there are no concerns regarding consent-taking. However, certain ethical concerns regarding data collection and analysis are handled during this research. Firstly, the data (i.e., memes) used in this study was publically available; still, the anonymity of platforms is maintained, except for those who have deliberately added their names to the memes. Secondly, the memes using offensive and abusive language were deliberately discarded. Furthermore, all the past research used for this study is properly cited in order to abide by the academic ethical rules. Lastly, the methodology is clearly and comprehensively developed to maintain transparency and can be replicated in future studies.

Analytical Discussion

The memes provide deeper insights into various aspects of society. In Pakistan, memes represent political, sociocultural, economic, religious, educational, climate, language, family, and cricket-related narratives as essential societal parts. Following is the analysis of a few memes of each category:

Political Memes

In Pakistan, politics is unstable and greatly influence the society. The military establishment affects Pakistani society's politicians, political policies, and public narratives. The following is an analysis of political memes representing Pakistani society:

Figure 1: Game of Loans



This meme provides a satirical representation of Pakistani politics, highlighting the corrupt Pakistani politicians and establishment. The image shows the manipulation of the drama series “Game of Thrones” into “Game of Loans” to highlight the economic failures Pakistan is facing due to the political figures. The characters of the drama series are portrayed as prominent Pakistani political figures, including Shahbaz Sharif, Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan, Maryam Nawaz, and some military administrators such as General Qamar Javed Bajwa, General Asim Munir, etc. Lion is the only non-humor character in this image, symbolizing the PMLN political party. As most of the political leaders in this image belong to this party, it is considered the most corrupt behind this issue. The facial expressions of some characters are serious, and some are smiling; the serious expressions depict their power of decision-making without considering its impacts on the country, while the smiling faces depict the character’s conscienceless attitude towards this serious situation and their internal satisfaction.

The dark background reflects the serious and evil nature of the political policies. The weapons, i.e., swords, armour, etc., demonstrate the power struggle and rivalry. The text “Game of Loans” is a mockery of Pakistan’s political and economic conditions, as the word “game” highlights how easy it is for politicians to take loans from international institutions, ignoring its

impacts on the Pakistani public. The integration of modes reinforces each other's meanings, as the image clarifies the meaning of the text by demonstrating who is behind this game of loans (Moaswes, 2019). Therefore, this meme serves as a political satire highlighting a major issue in Pakistan, demonstrating the public's dissatisfaction with the political policies of loan-taking (Raza et al., 2023). It is because this loan is not for public welfare but for the personal gains of the politicians.

This meme also represents the power and authority of the politicians critiqued by the public through creating memes to make fun of such devastating policies. The ideology of taking loans for the country's welfare is also neglected by declaring them as the game of politicians for their benefit, leaving the public under debt burden. The power of these influential political figures is represented in this meme (Sultana & Khalid, 2023). Through the analysis of all the modes, the overall meaning created by this meme is that Pakistani politicians are selfish and greedy and struggle for their self-interests, compromising the dignity and sovereignty of the country (Harbo, 2022).

Sociocultural Memes

Pakistani society has a diverse culture rooted in the religious and traditional landscape. Such kinds of memes do not involve power dynamics most of the time. They reflect society's cultural practices (Ahmad et al., 2024). The following meme is specified for a significant aspect of the sociocultural representation of contemporary Pakistani society distinct from any other society:

Figure 2: Bargaining skill of women



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This meme is a social commentary in the Pakistani context, where women show great bargaining power during shopping. The image has two parts: first, when the woman asks for the dress's price, and the shopkeeper tells her the price, while second, it shows the woman's bargaining and the reaction of the man who came with the woman to go shopping. The woman is wearing a black gown with a hijab that represents the religious culture of Pakistan. The Muslim women cover themselves according to the teachings of their religion in order to protect themselves from the eyes of non-mahrams (strangers). The man in this picture is a male relative of this woman and can be her husband or son, which shows the ideology of women leaving home with some male family member. His reaction before the woman's discounted price offer is normal, or as if he is getting bored, but after listening to the woman's offer, he tries to hide in his shirt, which shows his embarrassment from the shopkeeper on his mother or wife's statement. His expression and the drops of sweat are also evidence of this embarrassment and nervousness. Moreover, the dresses (kameez) hung in the shop that the woman is asking about are also the traditional dresses of Pakistan.

The text in the upper part of the image is regarding the price inquiry and the shopkeeper's reply. The first text, "Bhai ye suit kitnay ka hai?" (translated as: Brother, how much does this suit cost?) also reflects a cultural aspect through the word Bhai or brother. The Pakistani women call the stranger men brothers. The second text, "Aunty 2600 ka hai Fixed rate" (translated as: "Aunty it is 2600 Fixed rate" uses the word aunty to show respect for women and the age difference between the woman and the shopkeeper. Though not present in the picture, the shopkeeper is supposed to be younger than the woman due to the use of the word aunty. The phrase "Fixed rate" demonstrates that the shopkeeper already knows that the customer will bargain, so he refuses to bargain in anticipation. The third text in the second part of the image, "600 ka dena hai to batao!" (translated as: Say if you give it for 600!) exaggerates women's bargaining power. The woman has offered less than 25% of the actual amount.

The overall meaning conveyed by the integration of image and text is how frugal Pakistani women are in spending money. They know how to save money by bargaining with the shopkeepers who know these tactics of customers and highlight fixed rates with the price. Moreover, through the women's attire and the dresses hung in the shop, the cultural norms of Pakistani society are evident, proving memes as a tool for cultural commentary (Rasool, 2024).

The power struggle between the woman and the shopkeeper represents the cultural expectations of bargaining and fixed pricing (Moaswes, 2019). This means that despite fixed pricing, people (especially women) habitually bargain as an obligatory practice.

Economic Memes

The economic conditions of Pakistan are getting worse with time. The government policies are not public-friendly as inflation is increasing daily, and it is becoming difficult for a commoner to earn his livelihood without worrying. Following is the analysis of memes related to the economic conditions of Pakistan:

Figure 3: Unfair distribution of funds



In this meme, there is satire about the political policies that led to the country's economic crisis. This meme consists of 3 parts; in every part, there is one individual, and the background is blurred. The blurred background shows neglect of everything except the one mentioned by the individual in the image and the text written. It also hints towards a quickly changing scenario as the individuals appear to be spinning (like in playing kikli, a Punjabi folk dance). This means that no matter what happens in society, this problem will remain the same. In the first part, there is a woman with expressions of joy and excitement juxtaposing the overall idea of the meme; this indicates satire of the economic condition in Pakistan. The second one has a man who also expresses joy and entertainment. In the third part, the woman appears to be shouting out of frustration. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is wide open to shout. This shows the actual expressions of the public on the mentioned issue. The existence of both men and women in this

image indicates that every individual is affected by Pakistan's worst economic condition, regardless of any distinction.

The text is adding an explanation of the problem indicated in the image. In the first part, it is stated, "I can't afford healthcare," which means that a common individual of Pakistan has no access to healthcare facilities because its availability is not the focus of policymakers. Similarly, in the second part, the man says, "I don't have clean drinking water". This indicates the miserable condition of a Pakistani citizen who does not have this basic right of having clean and healthy water to drink due to the government's dehumanizing strategies (Khan, 2024). This is one of the most basic and minor human rights that is not available to Pakistanis, which highlights the unavailability of other rights as well. In the third part, the woman is shouting, "Let's spend 1,000,000,000,000 on the military." This is the reason for the above-stated issues and a mockery of the situation where the primary purpose of the government is to please the military, causing a social divide (Moaswes, 2019). It also indicates the major focus of policymakers on defense while designing budgets compared to any other domain of life. Text is written in capital letters, indicating the serious and grand level of the problem being addressed.

Together, the text and image pinpoint the careless and oppressive attitude of the authoritative institutions in Pakistan (Raza et al., 2023). Spending one trillion on the military while ignoring citizens' basic needs is criticized in this meme by highlighting the other attention-worthy problems of the commoner. This also highlights the power and influence of the military on policy-making departments and the awareness of the commoner about this influence (Amir, 2021). The purpose of this act is not primarily to strengthen the country's defense. Rather, it highlights the priorities of the great powers of the country and the corruption in these institutions. Therefore, the power dynamics are challenged through this meme from a commoner's perspective (Moussa et al., 2020).

Religious Memes

The religion of most people in Pakistan is Islam, influencing various aspects of society and culture (Bellar et al., 2013). However, many people need to be made aware of the actual teachings of Islam. They do not follow all the instructions of Islam but rather mock many religious aspects. Through memes, religion is not spread or preached in Pakistan; religious

memes are just used to mock non-practising Muslims. Following is the analysis of a religious meme:

Figure 4: Religious ignorance



This meme criticizes people's false beliefs and their ease of finding in religious matters. The image is taken from a cartoon program "Tom & Jerry" episode where the cat Tom dreamt to be dead and punished for his sins. However, the fire in this image is edited to exaggerate the situation and present a picture of hell. The character's facial expressions, i.e., his wide-open eyes, indicate the surprise and non-acceptance of the situation. He is trying to figure out the reason for this punishment despite doing what seems to him good deeds. The background presents the horrible environment of hell.

The text in Urdu shows its affiliation with Pakistani culture (Qureshi et al., 2023). The text on the top of the image (translated as) "O brother how am I here? I put on the lights at 12th Rabi-ul-Awwal." These words are sarcastic in the context that people have decided on good and bad deeds on their own, having no connection to religion. 12th Rabi-ul-Awwal is a sacred date for Muslims, known for the birthday of the last Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.W.). However, putting lights on houses for celebration is not a religious act. The good deeds are wrongly understood in our society. Due to this lack of religious knowledge, people consider themselves pious and heaven-deserving, as portrayed in this meme. The character is astonished at entering hell because he was not expecting this punishment. He considered himself pious by celebrating the 12th Rabi-ul-Awwal with lights.

Therefore, this meme is a religious satire on the ignorant people who do not follow the actual teachings of religion but rather make their own rules and criteria of good and bad (Bellar

et al., 2013). The power challenged in this meme is the whole non-practising Muslim community (Amir, 2021) to deliver the message that it is not that easy to get to heaven by merely doing such useless acts as putting lights on the house. Heaven can only be attained by following Islam's moral and spiritual teachings. So, there is a power struggle between the religious teachings and the social practices regarding religion (Moaswes, 2019).

Cricket Related Memes

Cricket is the favourite sport of the majority of Pakistanis. It is one of the common interests of the public, which they enjoy and often take seriously when defeated. Due to its undeniable popularity in Pakistan, it is considered a part of Pakistani society. The analysis of a meme related to cricket is given as follows:

Figure 5: Losing hope of winning

Jani agar Pakistan agray 4 matches jeet...

Chup. Bilkul chup



This meme depicts the Pakistani cricket team's poor condition and the fans' disappointment. The image portrays a man with his finger on his lips as if he is silencing another man before him. That other person is not present in the picture, but the expressions of this visible man highlight his presence. The expressions of this man are serious, indicating some distress and anger. The dark background also hints at disappointment in the situation.

The text is in the form of a dialogue between two people. The first dialogue is from an anonymous person who is hoping for a better result in the cricket match, saying, "Jani agar Pakistan agray four matches jeet..." (Translated as: "Dear if Pakistan wins next four matches..."). This sentence is interrupted by the man in the picture in anger or frustration to be silent and not to discuss or expect anything from the Pakistani cricket team due to their bad performance. He breaks in as "Chup. Bilkul chup" (translated as: Shut up. Just shut up"). This shows his

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frustration with the cricket team due to their bad performance. He does not want to listen to anything about this topic. He is even frustrated with the people who hope for any betterment by this team.

Overall, this meme indicates how seriously people take cricket in Pakistan. The image and text emphasize each other's meanings (Nita et al., 2021). The disappointment portrayed in this meme is also understandable by all Pakistanis, as they all know, and many have the same passion for cricket (Amir, 2021). However, the first hopeful dialogue is common, in which people try to make conditions to reach the finals, either by winning some matches or by defeating other teams, making room for Pakistan to proceed further. So, there is the representation of power struggles of hope vs. reality among the fans and the team.

Family Related Memes

Pakistani society is the one where people live together in the form of large families. Even if no joint family lives in a house, people are connected to their relatives, greatly influencing their lives. Such a family system is represented in the following meme:

Figure 6: Cousin Marriages



This meme is about a family-related sociocultural and religious aspect that is common in Pakistan. The image is not directly related to the situation portrayed. It is taken from a detergent advertisement. The man is the one who was introducing the product in the advertisement here in this context, portrayed as a parent (especially the father) or the authority. He is the one who is announcing the decision. His smile depicts his confidence as he is not answerable to anyone. His

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open arms are also showing his confidence and authority. He is inviting others for suggestions on his decisions. Furthermore, he is standing at some higher point; all others are lowered and looking above at him as if he has power over others. The men having a mic in their hands towards the authoritative man shows they are willing to listen to him.

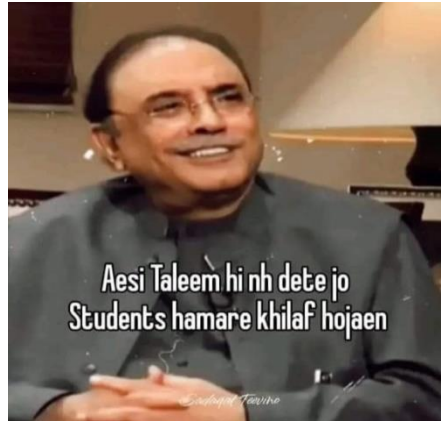
The image's background is a house in front of which this act is being performed, also hinting towards the family system. The text is written above the image (translated as), "when cousins of the same age group are present in the family, Le parents," which sets the context of the meme. It reflects the authoritative roles of parents in Pakistani families, where parents decide whom their children will marry without considering their opinions or likes and dislikes. Moreover, it demonstrates the typical cousin marriage culture of Pakistan due to the religious permission to marry a cousin. Pakistani parents try to find out proposals for their children within the family. For this reason, they do not consider whether their children are okay with it, even at a very young age.

The ideology behind this can be the trust in their families more than the outsiders. The second text is the statement made by the parents (translated as) "So let's fix the marriages," which indicates the sense of authority of the parents deciding where their children will marry. This practice is particularly evident in Pakistani culture as the traditional norm (Rasool, 2024). The emoji placed after the parent's statement is shuddering, indicating parents' sense of indifference to the feelings or preferences of their children. The text and image are integrated satirically to demonstrate and challenge this typical practice (Javed, 2022). The power structures portrayed here are achieved only by the parents, silencing their children's voices.

Educational Memes

The education sector is one of the underdeveloped areas in Pakistan. The quality and availability of education also differ from one region to the other due to the diverse attitudes of students towards it. In memes, the non-serious attitudes of students toward their studies or the poor quality of education are portrayed mostly. Following is the analysis of such a meme:

Figure 7: Political agenda behind substandard education system



In this meme, a political figure, Asif Ali Zardari, President of Pakistan, is depicted as the reason for the pathetic educational system in the country. He is smiling, showing satisfaction and contentment on his face. His sitting style and the placement of his hands show his formal attitude and confidence. His suit is a shalwar kameez, which is Pakistani national clothing. Above it, he wears a coat representing his formal and authoritative personality and the setting. The grey colour of his suit symbolizes sophistication and maturity. The background also highlights a luxurious and sophisticated place where his interview is conducted.

The text “Aesi Taleem hi nh dete jo Students hamare khilaf hojaen” (translated as: “We don’t provide such Education that Students stand against us”) is an open confession of the oppressive attitude of politicians towards the youth, especially students. He admits that politicians spoil Pakistan’s education system, so students may not get enough knowledge and wisdom to challenge the political policies or administration system. It is the strategy of corrupt Pakistani politicians to overcome the fear of opposition by youth because youth have the power to overthrow the cruel government (Raza et al., 2023).

Overall, this meme presents the dark side of political strategies against the youth, targeting their education in order to protect their agendas. Not only the particular politician expressed in the meme, but others also do the same, as they have no concerns with the country’s progress; rather, they care for their aims only. However, the portrayal of Asif Ali Zardari is significant in that he has more hold on Sindh province, where the education system is deteriorating badly. So, the power struggles are involved between the government and the

students. The hold of the government on the quality of education is highlighted. This meme is a criticism of Pakistan's education system that challenges society's power structures by revealing the negative faces of politicians (Wagener, 2023).

Language Related Memes

Pakistan is a multilingual state where the majority can speak more than one language. These languages include the regional languages, mostly the mother tongue, the national language, Urdu, and the official or secondary language, English. The proficiency of languages varies on the frequency of their usage. Due to continuous code-switching and code-mixing in different settings, there is a lack of perfection in these languages. This situation is depicted through the analysis of the following meme:

Figure 8: Multilingualism problems



This meme shows the problems Pakistanis face due to multilingualism. There are emojis and a cartoon sitting on the sofa with confused expressions. One of the emojis gives thinking expressions and provokes thoughtful insights into the subject. The second emoji, with the name of the Facebook page from which it has been taken, is laughing, showing its association with humour. The cartoon sitting on the sofa is a brown man like most South Asians, including Pakistanis. His expressions depict his confusion, while his body language and posture are relaxing, which means the problem is not major. However, his hand scratching his head shows tension, anxiety, and confusion.

The text in this meme explains the context for the above-mentioned confusion and problem. The name of the creator's page is "Lateefon ki duniya" (translated as: "World of

Jokes”), which is deliberately written on the meme in order to assure that the content delivered is just for humour purposes. The text below is written in Punjabi, a regional language of Pakistan, and is often associated with humour in memes. This text states, “Ki khayal ay?” (Translated as: “What do you think?”), to call for attention and to think over the stated issue in the form of a question. The rest of the text states the problem (translated as) “Problems of being Pakistani: speak Punjabi at home, speak Urdu at school, take exam in British English, speak American English in the workplace, give account after death in Arabic, now what can a man do except failing.”

In this text, the first sentence is about to whom this problem is related, that is, the Pakistani public. Next, various settings where different languages are spoken are mentioned. Firstly, a child speaks Punjabi at home as it is the mother tongue of Punjabis (the meme is created in Punjab, which is why this regional language is mentioned as the mother tongue). Then, at school, children are bound to speak Urdu rather than their mother tongue because Urdu is the national language of Pakistan. However, in exams, students are supposed to write in British English as it is the official language of Pakistan, a postcolonial country, and British grammar is the standard grammar. In offices or workplaces, employees are supposed to speak American English due to the increasing trend. In the end, when a person dies, he is accountable for his sins before Allah Almighty in Arabic. This is stated according to the religious beliefs of Muslims, for whom Arabic is the language of Islam. Anyhow, it is an exaggeration for this issue as it is not directly related to a living person’s problems.

The last sentence in the text is again in Punjabi, in which the confusion and anxiety are mentioned. However, most of the text is written in Urdu, showing its major influence in Pakistan (Qureshi et al., 2023). The creator is involved with the audience, stating that what can a person do except fail in such a complex situation. He is calling failure a natural outcome of this situation. This failure is at all the above-mentioned levels, at school, in my career, and in my life. However, the situation is exaggerated in this meme. The power struggle involves various languages in various social situations and among the speakers and languages in order to achieve particular expected language goals (Amir, 2021). In general, this meme represents language-based social ideologies, depicts Pakistani society as multilingual, and mentions where different languages are used (Moaswes, 2019).

Climate-Related Memes

Pakistan is a country with four seasons, namely summer, winter, autumn, and spring. The most prominent of these four seasons are winter and summer because winter and summer are extremely cold and hot. The monsoon or rainy season is also a part of summers and winters. However, summer, being the longest season in Pakistan, bears more mockery as represented below:

Figure 9: Extreme summers



The summer season at its extreme is depicted in this meme by the well-known superhero characters changing the situational context. As these superheroes used to wear heavy metallic suits, one of the characters does not wear his suit due to the extremely hot weather. He is wearing only undergarments to prevent the extreme heat and hinting towards outside where there is dazzling sun. The outside environment reinforces this condition. The yellow colour outside symbolizes sunlight, while some blurred buildings in the background show that they are present in some inhabited areas, i.e., society where other people live. This warmth also influences them. The characters are also in a room, the grey colour representing shade. The other character is wearing his suit, meaning he has not yet experienced the intense heat outside. His raised hands and gestures indicate that he is inquiring about the reason for something, more precisely, for his partner's not wearing a suit.

The image gives a very clear picture of the situation. However, the text adds more (Nita et al., 2021). On the top of the image is "Avengers in Pakistan," which presents the mocked situational context. 'Avengers' is a renowned American film series in which the superheroes protect the world from destruction, fighting against evil. The text points towards what would

have happened if the Avengers had been in Pakistan. Next is the question asked by Captain America, “Bhai suit kyun ni pehna?” (translated as: “Brother, why have you not worn the suit?”), which demonstrates his concern towards the other. The word Bhai (brother) is used in Pakistan to address friends, partners, and other men. The addressee replies to it by saying, “Bahar garmi dekh tu!” (translated as: “Look at the heat outside!”). This is the implicitly given reason for his not wearing a suit. Instead of directly stating the reason, he asks the other to experience the heat outside himself. The word he used to address “tu” (you) is informal in Urdu and used to address friends, showing the text’s involved nature and the closeness of these two characters.

This statement can also be considered as being under frustration, showing loss of temperament by people due to the intense weather. No one was supposed to ask about such an understood situation. The text is written in uppercase, emphasizing the intensity of weather conditions. So, this meme represents the ideologies of regional identities and people’s attitudes toward environmental changes. The multimodality in this meme has effectively reflected the social semiotics of climate conditions in Pakistani society and its influence on people’s behaviour (Nita et al., 2021). There is a power struggle between the expectations and realities that superheroes are expected to be perfect in every sense; however, they are also human beings affected by such climate changes and other social conditions.

Findings and Discussion

Analyzing all the memes related to Pakistani society shows a notable influence of government policies and administrative roles in many social institutions, as evident in political, economic, and educational memes. This shows a high degree of involvement of politicians and establishment within Pakistani society. Moreover, the text and visuals reinforce each other’s meanings, giving more clarity about the context (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016). The use of culture-specific words and the social practices demonstrated in the text and visuals highlight the sociocultural commentary of memes (Nita et al., 2021). Such cultural representations included dress codes, the Urdu language, socially manipulated religious practices, etc., that shape and reflect sociocultural identities (Rasool, 2024).

Furthermore, the social norms appear to be dominant over the religious ideologies (Bellar et al., 2013); however, certain social practices are aligned with the religion, i.e., cousin marriage

culture, as is permitted in Islam. In general, memes target political ideologies, cultural norms, social circumstances, practices, etc., and are dominant in society in the particular time frame they are constructed and circulated (Javed, 2022). The power dynamics within society are reflected and criticized through memes by satirical and humorous portrayals (Ahmad et al., 2024).

The authoritative role of government in most of the institutions, and of parents in the family, cricket players over fan's sentiments, etc., shows that each individual or organization tries to manipulate his power and authority over the people under their influence (Moussa et al., 2020). Through memes, these power structures are criticized and mocked to raise public awareness for a change against this manipulation (Amir, 2021). Through the lens of Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic theory (2005), it is clear that memes can portray society by integrating multiple modes, such as text and visuals. Also, they can reflect or challenge the dominant narratives, ideologies, and power structures within society.

Limitations

Despite the comprehensive study of social commentary by memes, there are certain limitations of this study:

- a.** The memes collected for this study are generated and circulated in one year, 2024, to analyze the current social trends, so the study is restricted to this narrow time frame.
- b.** The memes analyzed in this study are only those that reflect Pakistani society; the purposes and functions of the rest of the memes are unexplored in this study.
- c.** This study covers only the Pakistani context; trends outside Pakistan may vary from its findings. Thus, memes are not viewed as a global phenomenon.
- d.** The interpretative nature of the qualitative analysis methodology used in this study may overlook or misinterpret certain social circumstances.
- e.** This research also does not consider the impact of this digital discourse on different demographic groups.
- f.** The narrow dataset may also reduce the generalization of this study.
- g.** Meme creators are often anonymous; therefore, it is difficult to identify their intentions or affiliations, which directly affects the analysis.

- h.** The results are drawn using a single framework, such as Van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory, which focuses only on the semiotics and multimodality of memes and lacks insights into other dimensions of the study.
- i.** Due to the continuously evolving trends of digital culture changing the connotations and meanings of different modes, the significance of the findings of this study may last for a short period.

Implications

Despite limitations, this study's implications are extended to digital communication and cultural studies. Through this study, memes can be understood as political tools for activism and community engagement and as sociocultural artifacts that determine societal values. Their impact must be considered in communication strategies for effective sociopolitical discursive practices. They also provide deeper insights into identity creation, power dynamics, and driving social change. Moreover, they bridge the gap between formal and informal discourse regarding the evolution of language in digital media.

Therefore, this study contributes to the future development of digital communication strategies and their nuanced understanding in political, social, and cultural contexts. It can also provide new insights into studying cultural and societal narratives, exploring the interplay between traditional cultural values and modern digital illustrations presented through memes. Besides, it may help the masses understand serious social issues and improve them to reflect their society better.

Recommendations

This study recommends improvements in digital literacy to critically evaluate varied representations through memes. This can help individuals uncover the hidden messages encoded in memes and encourage the involvement of the masses in sociopolitical discourse. Furthermore, meme creators must carefully interpret the influence caused by this digital artifact within and beyond society to design and encode the intended messages in memes. They must also utilize these sources to address social issues, such as problems or narratives of marginalized communities, to bring positive societal change. In this way, memes can become a powerful and unavoidable source of awareness, especially in youth.

Future Trends

Future studies are expected to explore the cross-cultural functions of memes as global phenomena despite contextual specifications. Researchers may investigate more trends in memes and their sociocultural and political implications. The impact of memes on the masses and the narratives shaped by memes must also be analyzed critically to measure the extent of their influence on people from diverse demographical backgrounds, particularly on youth. Moreover, memes other than image macros, such as videos, GIFs, or other viral content, must also be investigated along with the continuous evolutions in digital communication, which determines the creation, circulation, and interpretation of memes in changing contexts.

Conclusions

The study examines the role of memes as social commentary through the lens of Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic Theory. It presents a holistic image of contemporary Pakistani society by analyzing the political, social, cultural, economic, religious, educational, cricket-related, family-related, language-related, and climate-related memes. The significance of the study lies in its application in digital literacy and communication studies to uncover dominant discourses. The findings revealed the social functions of memes in reflecting predominant perspectives, critiquing authority and power dynamics, fostering public discourse, and reflecting awareness of social issues. This study also explores the interplay between tradition and modernity, promoting evolving societal discourse. The implications of this research propose that memes have the authority to encourage digital literacy, enhance diverse representation, and drive social change. Such developments highlight the significance of memes in shaping social narratives and engaging communities.

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