HUMOR IN HOSTILITY: A CRITICAL MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF MEMES CIRCULATING ON SOCIAL MEDIA AFTER THE PEHALGAM ATTACK

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how humor operates as a discursive and ideological tool within the digital media landscape of Pakistan in the aftermath of the Pehalgam incident. Using a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) framework grounded in the works of Fairclough, Kress and van Leeuwen, van Dijk, Barthes, and Foucault, the research investigates the textual, visual, and contextual dimensions of war-related memes that circulated on Pakistani social media. These memes not only reflect sociopolitical tensions between Pakistan and India but also serve as vehicles for resistance, nationalism, and identity construction through humor and satire. The analysis reveals recurrent semiotic patterns, themes of cultural superiority, symbolic defiance, and strategic ridicule aimed at political adversaries. By decoding the narrative structures and intertextual references, the study highlights how digital humor in the form of memes becomes a soft power tool in shaping public opinion and reinforcing collective memory in conflict zones. The research contributes to the broader understanding of digital warfare, media semiotics, and the politicization of humor in times of hostility.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, humor has emerged as a powerful tool for navigating complex socio-political landscapes. Particularly in Pakistan, a nation frequently entangled in geopolitical tensions and internal conflicts, memes have become a salient medium through which citizens' articulate dissent, process trauma, and engage in political discourse. This phenomenon, often termed "mimetic warfare," reflects the intricate interplay between humor and hostility in digital communication. Memes, in this context, transcend mere entertainment; they function as highly potent vehicles for shaping public opinion, crafting national narratives, and challenging dominant political ideologies. Memes, as units of cultural transmission, encapsulate shared experiences and collective sentiments. A meme, in its simplest form, is a piece of media that spreads rapidly from person to person, often evolving along the way. According to Shifman (2014), memes act as cultural artifacts that reflect social, political, and emotional trends within a given context. As such, they are more than just digital jokes; they carry complex social and political messages, which make them powerful tools for subversive discourse. This is especially significant in countries like Pakistan, where political and military climates often fluctuate between tension and conflict, and where memes have become an outlet for citizens to both process and challenge the prevailing political narratives. The rise of memes in Pakistan's political landscape is particularly noteworthy in the context of national and international crises. During the heightened tensions between Pakistan and India in February 2019, for instance, social media platforms were inundated with memes that both mocked and criticized political leaders and military actions, reflecting a form of digital resistance and public engagement (Bukhari & Tariq, 2021). Memes circulated widely in the aftermath of the Balakot airstrike, blending humor with expressions of nationalistic pride, skepticism about official narratives, and mockery of political elites. In this regard, memes acted as a form of digital resistance, challenging authoritative voices and contributing to the discursive shaping of public opinion in the digital sphere. Humor, when used in this manner, becomes not merely an expression of levity but a mechanism for coping with trauma and managing hostile environments. Psychologists have long recognized humor as a psychological tool that allows individuals to make sense of distressing or threatening situations, providing relief in times of crisis (Manly, 2022). This process of using humor to alleviate stress can be particularly poignant in conflict settings, where the anxiety caused by violence, fear, and political instability can be overwhelming. In such

environments, memes provide a space for individuals to vent their frustrations, offer critiques of state actions, and build community through shared laughter in the face of adversity.

Memes are particularly significant in Pakistan, where traditional media outlets often operate within restrictions imposed by political, legal, or social forces. Social media, however, serves as an alternative, less-controlled space where memes can flourish and convey messages that might otherwise be censored in more formal mediums. Ayyaz, Khursheed, and Aslam (2022) argue that memes function as a form of counter public discourse, offering marginalized voices an avenue to challenge the status quo and critique dominant political ideologies. In Pakistan, where mainstream media may present a more sanitized version of political events, memes can subvert these official narratives, offering citizens an unfiltered and often humorous interpretation of current affairs. This article aims to explore the role of humor in hostile environments, specifically through the lens of memes in Pakistan's war climate that is after the incident of Pehalgam. The Pehalgam attack was an attack on tourists by five armed militants near Pehalgam in the Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir in which 26 civilians were killed on 22 April 2025. The militants mainly targeted Hindu tourists, though a Christian tourist and local Muslims were also killed in the attack (Wikipedia, 2025). Using a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) framework, the study will examine how memes function as tools for political commentary, identity construction, and emotional processing. By analyzing the content, context, and circulation of memes, the research seeks to understand the dynamics of digital humor in conflict settings and its implications for public discourse and political engagement in Pakistan. Additionally, it will consider the ways in which humor interacts with hostility, fostering a complex dialogue between satire, resistance, and public expression. This study is particularly timely, as the digital media landscape continues to evolve, and social media platforms remain a battleground for political discourse. Memes, which were once a marginal form of online communication, have now become central to the way people express opinions, process complex social issues, and engage with the world around them. As such, they represent a critical area of inquiry for understanding the intersection of digital media, politics, and society in Pakistan. Research objectives of this study were,

1. To investigate how war-related memes in Pakistan employ textual and visual elements to construct nationalist narratives and ideological positions.

2. To analyze the multimodal features of memes such as language, imagery, and symbolism that reproduce power structures and political discourses.

3. To explore the discursive strategies through which humor and satire are used to frame hostile relations, particularly between Pakistan and India.

4. To apply critical discourse theories in understanding how memes shape public perception during conflicts.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of memes as a tool for social commentary and political discourse has garnered significant academic attention in recent years, particularly within the context of conflict and crisis. In examining the role of memes in the discourse of hostility, it is essential to understand the broader theoretical frameworks of humor, discourse analysis, and political communication, as well as how these intersect in the online realm of Pakistan's digital culture. This literature review will explore the existing research on memes as political tools, their use in conflict settings, and the role of humor in hostile environments, focusing on their application within Pakistan's war climate.

Memes as a Political Tool

Memes have increasingly been recognized as a form of "mimetic warfare" or a digital tool used to influence public opinion and shape political narratives (Bukhari & Tariq, 2021). Shifman (2014) suggests that memes should not be considered merely as entertainment but as potent cultural artifacts that facilitate the spread of political ideologies and social critiques. Memes can be subversive, challenging dominant narratives, questioning authority, and providing a platform for marginalized voices. In the Pakistani context, memes often serve as a counter public discourse, offering an alternative space for dissent and critique. During moments of national crisis, such as tensions with India, memes have become central to expressing public opinion, creating humor around political leadership, military operations, and geopolitical events (Noor & Arshad, 2024).

The notion of memes as a form of "mimetic warfare" highlights their role in influencing and contesting political power structures. Bukhari and Tariq (2021) explored how memes have been used to shape public opinion in Pakistan during times of heightened political tensions, such as the 2019 India-Pakistan conflict. During this period, memes acted as instruments of digital resistance, allowing citizens to comment on military actions, criticize political leadership, and mock official narratives. This reflects the power of humor as a means of subverting authority while simultaneously expressing collective emotions like anger, fear, and frustration. The rapid spread and adaptability of memes in such contexts allow them to respond quickly to shifting political climates, making them effective vehicles for immediate reactions to political events.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become central arenas for the circulation of memes, allowing users to bypass traditional media channels and disseminate content that might otherwise be censored or suppressed. This allows memes to function as a form of "bottom-up" political discourse, where ordinary citizens can engage in public commentary without relying on state-controlled media (Javed, 2022). The rapid spread and adaptability of memes also mean that they can evolve quickly in response to changing political climates, making them effective tools for immediate reactions to political events and state actions.

Memes in Conflict and Crisis

Memes with far-right narratives, masked by humorous language and the power of a language with its perception, have significantly viewed the impact on a targeted personality or a character. Moreover, the representation of an ideology can be impacted through language (Bhatti, Khatoon and Ashraf, 2024). In conflict settings, memes take on a particularly significant role in both reflecting and shaping public sentiment. According to Zollo (2019), humor in times of crisis serves a cathartic function, allowing people to cope with the psychological distress associated with conflict. Humor, especially when coupled with satire, becomes a tool for criticizing authority and deflecting the severity of traumatic experiences. In Pakistan, a country that has been embroiled in political and military conflicts for decades, memes are a common method of expressing dissent and challenging state narratives. One of the most significant events that demonstrated the power of memes in conflict was the escalation of tensions between Pakistan and India in 2019. After the Pulwama attack, followed by the Balakot airstrike, memes flooded social media platforms, with citizens using humor to both criticize political figures and offer commentary on military actions. Memes related to the military strike often highlighted themes of national pride, mockery of Indian political leadership, and skepticism about the Pakistani government's portrayal of the event (Bukhari & Tariq, 2021). These memes acted as a form of emotional processing, allowing citizens to express their anger, frustration, and confusion in a manner that was accessible and often humorous. In this respect, memes not only function as political commentary but also as a form of resistance. When individuals are unable to engage in direct political protest, they may turn to humor and satire as a way to challenge the status quo. This form of indirect resistance allows for the subversion of dominant ideologies without overtly confronting authority, thus protecting the individual from potential repercussions. Manly (2022) argues that humor allows individuals to address sensitive topics in a less confrontational manner, making it more likely to gain widespread

traction and appeal. In this sense, memes provide a subversive yet effective way of engaging with power structures in Pakistan's political climate.

The Role of Humor in Hostility

Humor plays a crucial role in hostile and conflict-laden environments, acting as a psychological and social coping mechanism. Freud (1960) was among the first to theorize the importance of humor in psychological relief, suggesting that laughter serves as a mechanism for releasing pent-up emotions and providing a sense of control over otherwise uncontrollable circumstances. In Pakistan, where political instability and violence are recurrent themes, memes offer citizens a way to navigate the emotional complexities of living in a conflict zone. The humor embedded in memes helps to diffuse tension and facilitates social connection, allowing individuals to engage with difficult political situations in a more lighthearted manner. The dual function of humor, as both a coping mechanism and a political tool, is particularly relevant in Pakistan's digital landscape. As Khan (2021) observes, humor has become a mechanism for the public to engage with political trauma, where serious political events and national tragedies are transformed into sources of humor that help individuals cope with the stress and uncertainty of living in a conflict-ridden environment. The use of humor in memes often downplays the severity of political issues while simultaneously critiquing the parties involved. In the case of memes related to military actions and political leaders, the humor can serve as both a form of protest and a means of dealing with trauma, allowing individuals to reconcile the contradictions between patriotism, violence, and state authority. Furthermore, memes also function as a collective social activity, providing a sense of shared identity and solidarity among individuals in hostile environments. As participants in the digital meme culture, individuals are able to engage in collective social critique and comment on national issues in a way that transcends geographic and social boundaries. According to Shifman (2014), memes create communities of like-minded individuals who, through shared humor and satire, can forge bonds of solidarity that cut across traditional social divisions.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Memes

A key theoretical approach in examining the role of memes in conflict settings is multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), which enables researchers to analyze not only the linguistic content of memes but also their visual elements. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), discourse is not limited to language but also includes visual, spatial, and semiotic elements that contribute to meaning-making. Memes, which often combine text, images, and symbols, offer a

rich opportunity to explore how meaning is constructed through various modes of communication. By analyzing the multimodal aspects of memes, researchers can gain deeper insights into the ways in which political ideologies, social norms, and collective emotions are conveyed in digital spaces. In the case of Pakistan's political memes, the visual elements—such as the use of images from news broadcasts, caricatures, or memes featuring popular figures—play a central role in the creation of political meaning. These images often carry symbolic weight, serving as shorthand for larger political ideas and discourses. For example, the use of the national flag in memes may evoke sentiments of patriotism, while images of political leaders may be used to critique their authority or decision-making. The interplay between these visual and linguistic elements makes memes particularly effective in conveying complex political messages in a concise and easily shareable format. The capacity for memes to combine various modes of communication—such as images, text, and symbolism—makes them particularly effective in conveying political messages. The visual nature of memes allows them to transcend language barriers and appeal to a wide range of audiences, particularly in multilingual countries like Pakistan. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), multimodal discourse analysis reveals how images and texts work together to create meaning that is not solely dependent on one mode of communication. Memes, as visual and linguistic artifacts, are particularly suited for this type of analysis because they employ both visual cues (such as symbols, facial expressions, and iconic imagery) and textual elements (such as punch lines, hashtags, or captions) to convey complex political ideas. In the context of Pakistan's war climate, the images used in memes often carry profound symbolic meaning, representing national identity, political figures, and social movements. The combination of visual and textual elements in memes allows for a more nuanced form of political commentary, one that transcends the limitations of traditional forms of communication.

The role of memes in Pakistan's political landscape

It is raises important questions about the ethics and consequences of digital humor. While memes provide a space for dissent and critique, they can also contribute to the spread of misinformation, reinforce negative stereotypes, and escalate tensions in politically charged environments. The line between humor and hostility is often thin, and the potential for memes to perpetuate harmful narratives, such as those that target specific political groups or minority communities, cannot be ignored. As with all forms of communication, the use of humor in memes has the potential to either unite or divide, depending on the context in which it is employed. In the case of Pakistan, memes

have the power to both unify citizens in a shared sense of national identity and resistance, as well as perpetuate divisions within society. Memes have become more than just a tool for political expression; they are also integral to the evolving nature of social and cultural identity in Pakistan. The digital space created by memes allows for the fluid negotiation of political views, social values, and national identity. In an era where political discourse is increasingly mediated by digital platforms, memes offer a window into how people engage with political events, express collective emotions, and resist authority. By examining the role of humor and memes in Pakistan's war climate, it becomes clear that memes are a powerful force in shaping public opinion, creating social bonds, and facilitating political critique in a world that is increasingly defined by digital communication. The literature on memes in conflict settings, particularly in Pakistan, underscores their growing importance as tools of political discourse, social commentary, and resistance. By analyzing memes through the lenses of humor, discourse analysis, and political communication, this study aims to highlight their significance in shaping public opinion and offering alternative spaces for critique in a politically charged environment. Memes, as cultural artifacts, serve as powerful mechanisms for individuals to navigate trauma, resist authority, and engage with political realities in ways that transcend traditional media channels. In Pakistan's war climate, where tensions are high, memes offer a unique and subversive form of political engagement that combines humor with hostility, allowing citizens to express their frustrations, critiques, and solidarity in times of crisis.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study aims to explore and analyze the role of humor in hostility through the lens of memes in Pakistan's war climate from 22nd April to 5th May, 2025. The memes were on the peak at this time from Pakistani public on social media.

This study follows a **qualitative research design**, as it seeks to understand the meanings, themes, and nuances behind the use of humor in memes within the context of political and military conflict in Pakistan. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of meme production and consumption, focusing on the ways memes contribute to political discourse and public sentiment.

A **discourse analysis** approach is central to this study, as it enables the examination of how memes function as a discourse that reflects and shapes public opinion in Pakistan's war climate. The analysis focuses on the multimodal nature of memes, incorporating both textual and visual

elements to understand the political messages and social sentiments they convey. Discourse analysis also helps in identifying the power dynamics embedded in memes, such as the use of humor to critique political authorities and military actions.

In addition to discourse analysis, the study employs a **critical approach** to examine the role of memes as tools of resistance and political commentary. This approach allows for the examination of how humor in memes can challenge or reinforce dominant ideologies and power structures, particularly within the context of conflict and hostility. By adopting a critical lens, this study will evaluate how memes are not only forms of entertainment but also means of subversive political engagement.

Data Collection

The data for this research is primarily collected through **social media platforms**, particularly Facebook, which is the primary space for the circulation of political memes in Pakistan. The following steps were taken in the data collection process:

1. **Selection of Memes**: Memes were selected based on specific keywords related to the broader geopolitical tensions between Pakistan and India. Keywords such as ""military" "Pakistan vs India," "Pakistan army," and "war memes" were used to identify relevant memes.

2. **Sampling**: A **purposive sampling** method was used to select memes that were widely shared and discussed. The criteria for selection included the popularity of the meme (based on the number of shares, comments, and likes) and its relevance to the political or military discourse at the time. A total of 05 memes were selected as a sample for analysis, with an emphasis on both humorous and critical content.

3. **Platforms and Communities**: Memes were collected from both mainstream social media pages (such as political meme pages, news outlets, and public figure profiles) and smaller, more informal communities (such as personal profiles and group chats) where political memes were shared. This helped capture a broad range of political sentiments and humor.

The collected memes and accompanying social media comments were subjected to **multimodal discourse analysis (MCDA)**. This method involves analyzing the interplay between visual and textual elements in the memes to uncover the underlying political and social messages.

Textual Analysis: The linguistic components of the memes were analyzed to identify recurring themes, word choices, and humor techniques used in the captions or dialogues. Special attention was given to how humor, satire, and irony were employed to address political issues, critique

political figures, or offer commentary on military events. The analysis also examined how language was used to promote national identity or question the legitimacy of authority.

Visual Analysis: The visual aspects of the memes were scrutinized to understand how images, symbols, and visual metaphors worked together to convey political messages. Images of political leaders, national symbols, and military imagery were analyzed for their symbolic value. The study focused on how these visual elements interacted with the textual content to create humor, express solidarity, or challenge authority.

Contextual Analysis: The historical and political context surrounding the memes was critical in understanding their meaning. By considering the 2019 India-Pakistan conflict and the broader political climate in Pakistan, the study examined how memes acted as responses to specific political events and how they shaped the public discourse during that time.

Themes and Patterns: The memes were analyzed to identify recurring themes, such as national pride, military power, mockery of political figures, and the portrayal of the enemy (India) in a humorous light. These themes were categorized into broader political discourses that the memes engaged with, such as nationalism, military pride, and political satire.

Narrative Analysis: A narrative analysis was conducted to identify how memes construct stories around the conflict. Many memes told short, satirical stories that reimagined the events of the conflict in humorous or absurd ways. These narratives were analyzed to understand how humor functions as both a coping mechanism and a form of political resistance. Following theorists have been followed for the data analysis,

Theorist	Contribution Relevant to Analysis
Norman Fairclough	Discourse and power; CDA's focus on how language constructs society
Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen	Multimodal discourse; visual grammar; semiotics of image and text
Michel Foucault	Discourse as a mechanism of power and social control
Teun A. van Dijk	Ideology in discourse; discursive reproduction of dominance
Roland Barthes	Myth, punctum, and symbolic representation in imagery
Hayden White	Narrative construction and historical emplotment

Ethical Considerations

Given the nature of the research and the potential for memes to be provocative or offensive, ethical considerations were of paramount importance. The following steps were taken to ensure that the study adhered to ethical research standards. Since the memes analyzed were publicly available on social media platforms, no individual consent was required for their inclusion in the study. However, the study ensured that no personal information or identifiable details of individuals (e.g., profile names or private comments) were included in the analysis. All memes were treated as part of a public digital culture rather than personal data. Memes can sometimes contain harmful, discriminatory, or offensive content. Given that the research deals with politically sensitive material, particular attention was paid to ensure that the analysis did not inadvertently amplify harmful or divisive rhetoric. The study emphasized analyzing the political function of the memes rather than endorsing or promoting the content.

Data Analysis

Meme No: 1

The textual component of the meme functions as a central mode of meaning-making, employing irony and cultural intertextuality. The reference to the slogan "Bhutto zinda hai" draws on a politically loaded discursive memory in Pakistan, highlighting the endurance of personality cults. The exaggerated scenario of this slogan being inscribed on the walls of the Taj Mahal critiques political romanticism through satire. This aligns with Norman Fairclough's (1995) assertion that discourse both reflects and shapes social reality. The modal choice of informal, emotionally resonant Urdu combined with poetic rhythm fosters an affective relationship with the viewer,

inviting both laughter and reflection. The text's function as a semiotic resource—following Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's (2001) work—demonstrates how language operates not only descriptively but symbolically within social structures.

The visual mode centers on a digitally illustrated young woman with exaggerated, expressive features. Her tired eyes, slouched posture, and loose clothing communicate a state of disillusionment, suggestive of emotional labor and political fatigue. This echoes Roland Barthes' (1977) notion of the "punctum" in imagery—the affective point that draws the viewer into a deeper, subjective interpretation. The image also functions iconically, representing the archetype of a socially aware yet emotionally drained youth, particularly a woman, in contemporary Pakistan. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework on the grammar of visual design can be applied here: the viewer's gaze is directed to her eyes and body language, invoking empathy and emotional resonance, while the gaze is "demanding" but passive, drawing in the observer without aggression. Contextually, the meme operates within Pakistan's contemporary war climate and its persistent reliance on populist, dynastic political narratives. The socio-political slogan "Bhutto zinda hai" is recontextualized within a historical and symbolic location (the Taj Mahal), creating a satirical juxtaposition that reflects how political discourse permeates sacred or neutral cultural spaces. Michel Foucault's (1972) theory of discourse and power is particularly relevant here: the meme challenges how dominant narratives attempt to discipline memory and space through ideological permanence. The meme also subtly critiques how social media, as a space of alternative discourse, becomes a tool for the oppressed or disillusioned to reframe public memory.

Themes that emerge from this multimodal artefact include the politicization of heritage, the emotional exhaustion of the populace, and the absurdity of repetitive political mantras. Through repetition and exaggeration, the meme foregrounds how political discourse operates as what van Dijk (1998) calls a "structure of legitimation," reinforcing authority through symbolic continuity. The pattern of using young female characters in memes to express national fatigue or resistance also reflects gendered modes of emotional expression in digital cultures. The meme's use of emojis further reinforces the convergence of affective and symbolic communication, supporting Kress's (2010) view that multimodal texts are shaped by the social environments in which they circulate. Narratively, the meme presents a dystopian imaginary wherein historical monuments are hijacked by political propaganda. This hyperbolic scenario aligns with Hayden White's (1987) concept of "emplotment," where even seemingly humorous narratives are rooted in deeper political critique.

The exhausted female figure becomes a narrator of silent resistance, offering a counter-narrative to the state-sponsored glorification of political leaders. This interplay between visual and textual storytelling forms a cohesive multimodal ensemble that critiques hegemonic discourses while offering space for alternative voices. The narrative's affective structure, combining humor, cynicism, and despair, exemplifies Barthes' view of myth as a system of communication—where even playful formats like memes can serve to critique ideological saturation.

Meme No: 2

The meme displays overt political and nationalist rhetoric. Phrases such as *"Coming soon to New Delhi – Greater Pakistan"*, *"(Formerly known as India)"*, and *"In Sha Allah!"* construct a symbolic narrative of conquest and ideological expansion. The Urdu text, which roughly translates to "Now every Indian will consider Greater Pakistan their home," reinforces this sentiment. The use of religious expression ("In Sha Allah") imbues the message with divine legitimacy. According to Norman Fairclough (1995), such textual strategies reflect and reproduce power by embedding ideological beliefs within seemingly promotional language. The caption "Free cup of tea for all former Indian ranks @ your doorstep!" adds an element of sarcasm, mocking India's military hierarchy, and reflects a triumphalist tone common in nationalist discourses. The central image combines the Red Fort (Laal Qilla), an iconic symbol of Indian sovereignty, with superimposed architectural motifs of Pakistan's monuments, such as the Minar-e-Pakistan. Two Pakistani flags replace the traditional Indian symbols, visually signaling an imaginary conquest. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework of visual grammar is applicable here—the replacement of spatial elements signifies domination and cultural assimilation. The deliberate fusion of national symbols

conveys a post-war utopia envisaged by the meme's producers. The cup of tea, placed in the lower-left corner, operates as a multimodal pun, referencing a past viral meme about an Indian pilot captured by Pakistan, further intensifying the mockery. This meme arises in the context of Pakistan–India hostility, particularly amid heightened nationalist sentiments and media rhetoric during or post-conflict. It exemplifies Michel Foucault's (1972) understanding of discourse as a means of producing truth and exercising symbolic control. By recoding Indian heritage into "Greater Pakistan," the meme constructs a discursive future where geopolitical boundaries are rewritten, not by diplomacy but by narrative assertion. This reflects the ideological function of memes in conflict zones—they become sites for performative assertion of imagined victories and alternative realities. The dominant theme is nationalist triumphalism. The meme promotes an irredentist fantasy of territorial acquisition, fueled by historical grievances and contemporary military tensions. It also relies on humiliation and subversion of the enemy's symbols—a recurring pattern in wartime digital propaganda. Teun van Dijk's (1998) emphasis on macrostructures of discourse—such as the polarization of 'us' vs. 'them'—is particularly relevant. The phrase "Formerly known as India" reflects a symbolic annihilation of Indian identity, embedded within the imagined reality of Pakistani supremacy. The pattern of using culturally sacred or politically significant landmarks to construct satirical projections is also observable in other political meme discourses. The meme's narrative arc presents a fictional future where Pakistan has not only defeated India but annexed its capital and national monuments. The performative message is layered with satire, nationalism, and religious symbolism. Hayden White's (1987) concept of "emplotment" helps illuminate how memes like this construct historical futures by using familiar genres—here, a blend of political conquest and real estate advertisement—to reimagine national boundaries. The hyperreality created by merging real architectural images with symbolic elements encapsulates Baudrillard's (1981) notion of simulation, where the distinction between reality and representation collapses into ideological desire. Through this narrative, the meme both entertains and reasserts cultural dominance within a digital battleground.

Meme No: 3

 The textual content *"Pak Lover's Tea is Fantastic"* is a satirical reference to a real historical event involving Indian Air Force pilot Abhinandan Varthaman, who was captured by Pakistan in 2019 after a failed airstrike. During his detention, he was offered tea, and his polite response—"The tea is fantastic"—became an iconic phrase in South Asian media. The text reframes this phrase as a declaration of admiration toward Pakistan, turning an apolitical statement under duress into an involuntary endorsement. Norman Fairclough (1995) emphasizes how language in such contexts operates ideologically, embedding power relations within everyday phrases. The use of "Pak Lover's" as a possessive construct further exaggerates the affiliation, appropriating the identity of the 'enemy' for comic nationalist reinforcement. The image centralizes the pilot in uniform against a backdrop of warfare, including explosions and fighter jets, possibly referencing the Pulwama-Balakot episode. The cup of tea in the foreground functions as a visual anchor, drawing attention to the meme's core satirical point. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual grammar model, the pilot's centered position denotes salience and heroism, but in a reversed, ironic role. The contrast between the calm demeanor of the pilot and the chaos in the background visually reinterprets captivity as symbolic surrender. Roland Barthes' (1977) idea of myth as a depoliticized speech is useful here—the pilot becomes a visual signifier not of war trauma, but of Pakistani hospitality and triumphalism. Contextually, this meme reflects how a moment of international military conflict is recontextualized into digital satire. The meme takes place within a discursive battleground where national pride is mediated through viral content. According to Michel Foucault (1972), such discourses produce regimes of truth—here, the 'truth' that Pakistan emerged morally superior from the encounter. The meme also draws upon the South Asian tradition of humor in hostility, where war narratives are reshaped into mockery through digital means. The uniform, tea, and battlefield are semiotic indicators that blend material reality with ideological appropriation.

Themes of mockery, symbolic inversion, and digital nationalism are prominent. The captured pilot is not shown as a prisoner of war, but reimagined as a grateful guest—a satirical reversal that reflects Teun van Dijk's (1998) observations on in-group versus out-group discourse. The recurring motif of tea serves both as a national stereotype and a sarcastic emblem of psychological victory. There's also a broader pattern of memes acting as extensions of state ideology, where military superiority is represented not through official communiqués but through popular culture. This aligns with Barthes' notion of "second-order semiotic systems," where everyday signs (tea, politeness) are repurposed to convey political myths. The narrative emplotment here portrays a captured enemy praising the hospitality of the nation that defeated him, constructing a pseudo-realistic tale of moral and cultural dominance. Hayden White's (1987) concept of narrative as a mode of historical consciousness is relevant—the pilot is not remembered for his military failure but for endorsing Pakistani tea. This retrospective narrative reduces war to a punchline, reframing defeat into symbolic victory. Jean Baudrillard's (1981) theory of simulation can also be applied: the meme operates as a simulacrum, where reality is displaced by representation. The actual event is subsumed by the meme's ironic retelling, which becomes more 'real' in popular discourse than the event itself.

Meme No: 4

The Urdu text *"India k jahaz anay tak udhar band hae"* (Translation: *"No credit until Indian jets arrive"*) deploys satire rooted in national defense discourse. The shopkeeper's statement humorously weaponizes the notion of delayed or unlikely events to justify a commercial decision—denial of credit. On the surface, it's an economic message, but metaphorically, it signifies skepticism about Indian military power. According to Fairclough (1995), such everyday utterances function ideologically when they embed political meaning into mundane social

practices. The conditional clause, "until Indian jets arrive," becomes a humorous euphemism for *never*, mocking the threat of Indian air strikes and projecting national confidence. While the meme is text-based, its placement on a shop board and the context of a local marketplace visually signify ordinariness and ground-level public discourse. The hand-written or printed note embodies vernacular resistance. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argue that multimodal meaning-making occurs not just through the sign itself but through its material presentation. The casual, possibly handwritten sign reflects both urgency and informality, suggesting that even at the grassroots level, nationalistic mockery permeates daily life. The medium (a store sign) anchors the political satire in everyday economic behavior. This meme-text emerges from the post-Pulwama and Balakot conflict discourse, where aerial warfare between Pakistan and India became a highly mediatized event. The shopkeeper's sign reflects not just humor but a micro-level political commentary. Foucault (1972) would interpret this as a grassroots "subjugated knowledge"—a local, informal mode of discourse that resists dominant narratives through irony. It also reflects the pervasiveness of militarized nationalism, where even apolitical domains (like small businesses) become canvases for geopolitical expression. Humor thus functions as both an act of social defiance and collective meaning-making. Themes of **ridicule, resistance, and temporal deferral** dominate this meme. The denial of credit is not economic but symbolic—it is a refusal to grant legitimacy to the perceived threat of Indian airpower. This aligns with van Dijk's (1998) notion of "semantic macrostructures" where seemingly unrelated statements (shop policies) are ideologically loaded to create ingroup (Pakistan) superiority and outgroup (India) inferiority. The pattern here is the trivialization of war through humor, a theme that recurs in Pakistani memes where enemy capabilities are dismissed with sarcasm and exaggerated doubt. This meme constructs a narrative of national confidence and defiance through the everyday lens of a shopkeeper's board. The "arrival of Indian jets" becomes an unlikely future event—akin to a fairytale—positioned as the precondition for an unrelated activity (offering goods on credit). Hayden White's (1987) idea of *emplotment*—how historical experience is structured into narrative genres—is relevant here. This sign casts India's military as a fantastical, absent force, delegitimized through exaggeration and conditional temporality. The narrative outcome isn't defeat or attack—it is ridicule. It echoes Barthes' (1977) conception of *myth* as speech stripped of contingency, recoded into cultural common sense: here, the idea that Indian threats are empty becomes a humorous truth inscribed on a shop wall.

Meme No: 5

Although the meme itself is largely visual, its implicit message is underpinned by culturally charged semiotic contrasts. The juxtaposition of **missiles versus cows** operates as a powerful metaphor. India's display of military aggression through the depiction of missiles pointed toward Pakistan signals literal threat and national defense. In contrast, Pakistan's response—placing cows (bearing Pakistani flags) aimed toward India—relies on symbolic insult through cultural subversion. This embodies what Fairclough (1995) calls *interdiscursive conflict*, where contrasting signs (weapons vs. sacred animals) challenge each other in the realm of public meaning. The absence of explicit text further amplifies the ideological weight of the visuals, allowing interpretation to flow from cultural literacy and shared hostility. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual grammar, this meme creates opposition through vectorial alignment—Indian missiles are shown as high-tech, metallic, and violent; Pakistani cows are organic, grounded, and visually non-threatening but symbolically provocative. The Pakistani flag on cows transforms them from mere animals into ideological agents. In Indian Hinduism, cows are sacred, considered maternal figures ("gau mata"), and to position them in a threatening stance is a direct visual violation of religious sentiment. The meme employs frontal imagery, making both the weapons and the cows face the viewer (and each other), emphasizing confrontation. From a semiotic standpoint (Barthes, 1977), the missile signifies aggression, power, and modern warfare, while the cow—a traditional and holy figure—becomes a tool of mockery. Pakistan's cows, instead of expressing peace, are weaponized in a symbolic-cultural domain, exploiting religious reverence for ridicule. It is not the cow itself, but what it *represents*, that becomes the focal weapon in this visual narrative.

This meme circulates within a historical context of **Pak-India military standoffs**, particularly in periods of cross-border tension. By ridiculing Indian religious sentiment, the meme engages in discursive othering (van Dijk, 1998), reinforcing the in-group's (Pakistani) intellectual and cultural superiority. Foucault's (1972) notion of discourse as power-embedded knowledge is relevant—religious belief is recast as vulnerability. Rather than countering missiles with missiles, Pakistan (in the meme) employs cultural resistance—humor, sacrilege, and symbolism. The meme's humor masks an underlying aggression, which serves to humiliate the adversary not through force but through ideological reversal. This also reflects Pakistan's digital subaltern expression—where memes act as anti-hegemonic tools, resisting India's superior military stature by mocking what it holds sacred. It's a form of asymmetric symbolic warfare. The central theme is symbolic humiliation, conducted through religious satire. There's a broader pattern of cultural inversion: instead of reciprocating militaristic hostility, Pakistan reclaims power by subverting Indian identity markers. This meme fits into the larger genre of digital nationalist humor, where national boundaries are reimagined through iconography (missiles, flags, animals). Van Dijk's model (1998) of discourse reproduction shows how memes recycle familiar cultural antagonisms in simplified, emotionally resonant ways. The image suggests that faith can be turned against the faithful, especially when repurposed by an opposing ideology. It aligns with Barthes' theory of *mythologization*, where sacred figures (the cow) are stripped of their original significance and redefined in political mockery. Narratively, the meme constructs a farcical story: India brings weapons to the border; Pakistan brings cows—yet these cows are far more devastating in symbolic force. This is a satirical subversion of military power—a postmodern narrative where meaning displaces matter, belief displaces ballistics. Hayden White's (1987) theory of narrative emplotment helps us understand how the meme reframes traditional binaries: power vs. vulnerability, offense vs. defense, sacred vs. profane. Baudrillard's (1981) theory of *simulation* is also apt here. The meme creates a simulated scenario—one that never happened in reality—but has deep symbolic resonance. It is hyperreal: more powerful as satire than as a physical event.

Conclusion, Findings and Discussion

This study set out to investigate the role of humor in politically charged memes circulating within Pakistan's digital space during periods of heightened tension with India. Through a multimodal critical discourse analysis informed by theorists such as Fairclough, van Dijk, Foucault, Kress and

van Leeuwen, Barthes, and Hayden White, it becomes evident that these memes are not merely humorous artifacts but are potent cultural texts that encode ideology, identity, and resistance.

The textual and visual strategies employed in these memes reflect a deliberate attempt to mock, delegitimize, and invert dominant narratives around military aggression, religious sanctity, and national superiority. By juxtaposing imagery such as missiles with cows or using absurd statements like "*India k jahaz anay tak udhar band hae*," meme creators construct a form of discursive defiance that blends humor with nationalistic assertion. These acts of satire function not just as entertainment but as digital performances of patriotism, boundary-making, and cultural assertion. The memes illustrate how ordinary individuals, through digital platforms, participate in the symbolic war effort by producing content that reinforces group identity while ridiculing the perceived enemy. The intertextuality and intervisual elements reveal a broader narrative of historical tension, militarized nationalism, and digital populism. The findings of this study support the idea that **memes function as ideological weapons** in modern warfare—not through direct violence, but through symbolic subversion. Fairclough's (1995) view of discourse as social practice is particularly relevant here, as the humor embedded in these memes reveals deeper social attitudes toward national pride, religious critique, and militaristic bravado. These are not isolated jokes; they are acts of meaning-making that reflect public sentiment in real time. Van Dijk's (1998) ideological square—emphasizing the positive self-representation of the in-group (Pakistan) and negative portrayal of the out-group (India)—is visibly enacted in the memes. Moreover, the memes rely on shared cultural knowledge, which is what makes them effective and widely relatable. Without an understanding of regional conflicts, religious taboos, and linguistic nuances, their meaning would be lost. This reinforces Barthes' (1977) argument about myth and meaning: memes communicate not through literal language alone, but through signs embedded in cultural memory. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual grammar further supports the finding that visual semiotics are deliberately used to evoke emotion and reinforce perspective—missiles connote threat, cows connote sacredness, and their juxtaposition becomes mockery. In this way, memes blur the lines between humor and hostility, and between citizen discourse and geopolitical commentary. Foucault's (1972) theory that knowledge and power are co-produced is critical here. The memes analyzed do not just reflect dominant discourses; they also produce counter-discourses. The humor in them is a form of grassroots resistance to perceived hegemony, challenging militaristic

aggression with symbolic ridicule. This signals a shift in how conflict is publicly negotiated—not solely through institutional channels, but also through digital vernacular.

The meme that used cows with Pakistani flags turned religious sentiment into a satirical defense mechanism. While it may appear humorous, it touches on profound discursive violence, one that challenges the sanctity of belief systems and elevates nationalism above inter-religious respect. Such examples highlight the ethical and cultural implications of meme warfare, which often goes unchecked in unregulated digital environments.

Suggestions

1. Future research should expand on how meme culture contributes to the normalization of antagonism during geopolitical conflicts. Comparative studies across South Asian digital spaces could further illuminate cross-border digital narratives.

2. Given the ideological power of memes, media literacy programs should include education about digital semiotics and the ideological framing of humor. This could help reduce the uncritical consumption of politically charged content.

3. Policymakers should be aware that even non-explicit media forms like memes can escalate tension and spread misinformation. Regulatory frameworks should evolve to monitor digital satire that crosses ethical or religious boundaries without suppressing freedom of expression.

4. Memes offer a powerful entry point for discussions on nationalism, identity, and political discourse. Teachers in media, communication, and cultural studies can incorporate meme analysis into curricula to enhance critical thinking among students.

5. Those producing political memes should recognize the dual power of humor—to heal or to harm. A more reflexive approach to meme creation could encourage satire that questions power without relying on cultural or religious provocation.

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