

## Humour, Virality and the Politics of Internet Memes

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### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the impact of Internet memes and humorous viral content on power relations in South Asia using the case study of Pakistan. This question is important because the debate regarding the role of new media and the Internet in politics – either characterising it as a democratising force or as an additional arena for state surveillance and performativity – suggests that it is an important space in which interactions between the state and its constituents must be understood. Considering this, the paper assesses how the proliferation of Internet memes and other humorous viral content on this terrain affects the relationship between actors within public spheres in South Asia with respect to three socio-economic cleavages. The first of these cleavages is relates to the digital divide, the second is generational, and the final one relates to literacy. The paper will begin with a conceptual analysis of literature on humour and memes generally and the key trends and debates that emerge from it before applying them to the Pakistani case in the context of politics and culture. The main conclusion that this paper arrives at is that while Internet memes and humour viral content allow public discourse to address local grievances in a unique manner, they also entrench class and other social divides that can only be overcome through shifts in policy and legislation.

*Keywords:* memes, politics, Pakistan, discursive transmission, semiotic production

### Introduction

Over the years sociologists have suggested different means of best understanding societies and the way their constituents build culture and identity. Karl Marx (1859) argued that gaining an insight into one of the economic base or the cultural superstructure enhanced one's understanding of the other and ultimately of society on the whole. The superstructure in this analysis produces the propaganda that informs the majority of social meaning-making and it is controlled by the bourgeoisie. In contemporary Pakistan as well as in the world more broadly, what have come to be known as memes constitute an interesting disruption to this pattern of semiotic production.

Considering this, the primary objective of this paper is to look at how memes have impacted public discursive transmission and culture-making in Pakistan, given their relatively recent emergence within the cyber-public sphere. The need for such an intervention arises from the lack of exploratory work mapping out the boundaries of the meme sphere and thus most lay analyses either understate or overstate its influence – as has been done with many trends that have emerged with the rise of the Internet according

to noted Internet scholar Evgeny Morozov (2011).

This paper hypothesises that although Internet memes allow for grievances to be expressed and engaged with in a unique manner, the extent of their impact remains subject to three important divides – digital, generational, and literacy – that manifest within Pakistani society. This impact causes them to play a double role where they ease access to the superstructure for some, but further entrench existing cleavages for others.

In order to argue this, first I will use my literature review to build a conceptual framework by reviewing historical and theoretical literature that will form the base upon which further scholarship pertaining to specific points and memes will be analysed. Following this, I will examine the three aforementioned divides in the context of their application to Pakistani society and memes. Finally, I will examine the political and cultural effect of memes with respect to their potential for positive social and communicative change. It is important to mention, however, my positionality within this analysis as an outsider, since it impacts my access to certain parts of the meme sphere

and raises a very relevant potential criticism regarding my understanding of the very diverse Pakistani societies.

### **Methodology**

This paper's methodology was largely based on assessing a set of key literature relating the spread of memes within society and applying it to the Pakistani context, keeping the above-stated hypothesis in mind. Concurrently, this paper also exhibits a multimodal discourse analysis of a sample of the most popular memes to enter the Pakistani memosphere in the years between 2010 and 2017. The primary modes of this analysis are the relationship of the meme to its purported consumer and the extent to which it demonstrates the applicability of theoretical item or concept that it relates to among those discussed in this paper. The sample of memes was purposive and selected based on the ease of relating them to these modes within the Pakistani context, in addition to representing a variety of meme forms, both visual and textual. They were then placed throughout the paper in alignment with the key literature and concepts to which they most clearly relate.

Aside from the works setting out the conceptual framework within which analysis relating to the hypothesis takes place, this paper will also involve theoretical works that more specifically correlate with the discrete points that this paper will make regarding the political and cultural impact of memes. Primarily, these works elaborate on three main sociological points: Karl Marx's formulation of personal appropriation, Steve Mann's concept of sousveillance, and Asif Bayat's notion of the creeping encroachment of the ordinary. This paper also makes use of secondary quantitative data gathered by Pakistani governmental and non-governmental organisations in order to assess the three divides mentioned above that prevent this paper from adopting an overly positive perspective on the role memes play within the Pakistani public sphere, if such a united public sphere can be said to exist.

Through this methodology, this paper aims to build a robust theoretical base from which further hypotheses can be developed and applied through more direct social engagement with Pakistani meme-consumers at large through other methods such as

surveys or ethnographic fieldwork. Time and budgetary constraints have prevented this from being a part of this paper's methodology, and while this does impact the reliability of any generalisations made, the dearth of meaningful, non-Eurocentric, studies of memes within a social, political, or cultural context grants this paper an important validity and academic function as a form of basic, exploratory research within this field.

### **Literature Review**

To begin, it is important to explore the lexical and conceptual history of the meme. The oft-quoted record of how the term entered the academic vernacular is through Richard Dawkins's 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. In it, he describes memes as "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, and ways of making pots or of building arches" (p.192). In this sense, memes are nothing new and the term has found its way into the vocabulary of a variety of academic disciplines including literature, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, and others. The most significant factors that have allowed the meme to become embedded within the popular vernacular are the recording and sharing technologies that have emerged with the arrival of new media. Making recording accessible allows a content-creator to embed meaning within both text and images (and possibly video and audio) while the capacity to share it within far reaching personal networks allows them gain the virality that propels the content into the memosphere. In the Pakistani context, a good example of this is the "Saeen to Saeen" meme, which developed from being a line in an amateur music video into taking on a visual form (that of a Sindhi cap and moustache) and social meaning, addressing feudal privilege (Gul Pir, 2012). An example of this type of meme format is present in figure 1.

The three main features of a meme, as Dawkins goes on to mention, are fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Longevity refers to a meme's ability to remain relevant over time while the first two of these features call back to the etymological root of the word "meme", mimesis, which is Ancient Greek for imitation; the former relating to a meme's ability to be replicated in terms of accuracy and the latter in terms of volume. A clear example within the Pakistani memosphere of the movement of an academic meme into the popular

consciousness is the “dil garden garden hua” meme that has gained virality in recent years (Khan, 2017) (see figure 2 for example). The language used in the original video that spawned the viral image may or may not have been an attempt at quoting the Bollywood song Dil Garden Garden Ho Gaya, but it certainly does call back to the poetic genre of gulshan shayari, where the meaning of the garden in the text is understood and replicated over time – as any good meme should be.

The source of comedic value for today’s popular memes comes from Dorf Zillman and Jennings Bryant’s (1980) work on the misattribution theory of tendentious humour, which they explore in depth in their article of the same name. Tendentious humour, in contrast to innocent or innocuous humour, is thought of as humour that requires a victim – or at least somebody at whose expense the humour is directed – according to the renowned Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1905).

One of the things that separates memes from other forms of humorous expression is their ability to combine both innocuous and tendentious humour into such a small unit of cultural production. Misattribution would suggest that the viewing masses perceive the humour of the meme as being in the innocuous joke on the surface, but the nucleus of the humour lies within its underlying hostility to political and socio-economic conditions that on their own may constitute a source of pain rather than levity.

Any discourse on memes should exist within the context of existing debates regarding the role of new media within the communication landscape. In this sense, it is prudent to refer to the debate about the democratising power of new media. A lot of literature was published casting it as a democratising force following the Arab revolutions of 2011, often referring back to John Perry Barlow’s Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace that declared cyberspace to be an area of little government control. It is important, however, to remain sceptical about this position due to how government attempts to exert control over cyberspace often leads to deadly consequences. States carry out performances online as they do in the real world and as such, it is important to recall Bruno Latour’s

statement that technology does not yield to power but offers “other means to power that cannot be foreseen” (1988, p.229).

While this paper has often referred to content becoming memes upon achieving virality, it is important to delineate where content is simply viral and where it is a meme. There are two key distinctions to be made. The first is that the intentionality of memes is often questionable. In contrast with other forms of viral content such as political slogans, marketing campaigns and others content that is specifically designed to achieve mass appeal, memes can be less deliberate and often gain virality for something less deliberate. This is what separates Aamir Liaquat’s “kaisa diya?” from the Bhuttos’ “roti, kapra, makaan”.

The second distinction is that while much other viral content is designed to influence the viewer, memes are meant to be a reflection of the viewer’s pre-existing thoughts as a function of creating imagined communities and allowing average digitally connected individuals to become themselves repositories of a form of social commentary. The profile pictures of Pakistani cricket fans during the 2011 World Cup are an example of this, where a particular style of edited cricketing image gained popularity. Fatima Aziz, who has written about this, describes this as the adaptation of offline “carnavalesque behaviour” to the “digital environment and its affordances” (2012).

#### **Data and Analysis: Three Important Divides**

Pakistan is a particularly interesting case study when it comes to examining the way memes have impacted the communication landscape. The country’s large youth bulge suggests that the population is experiencing a steady increase in the number of digital natives that are attempting to bridge the digital divide. The lack of direct channels through which young people can participate in more mainstream forms of contributing to public discourses also allow the digital sphere to take on a position as a sort of release valve for a lot of the pressures that young people face. It is also important to note the failure of the Pakistani state to successfully engage cyberspace as a means of building a positive relationship with society. This confrontational stance is best indicated by the frequent banning of social media website, YouTube being the most

notable, and by the failure of legislation to demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of computer mediated communication. This was a common criticism of the 2015 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, for example.

In this vein, it is vital to examine the three main divides that exist with regards to new media and society, generally and specifically in the case of Pakistan. The first of these divides is the digital divide, which dictates who has access to the technology that facilitates communication over new media. So far, the majority of this paper has referred to memes only in the context of those with access to digital technologies, and in this regard, it is important to point out the limits of this demographic in Pakistan.

According to the think tank Bytes for All, internet penetration in Pakistan seems to range between 17% and 18% as of 2016 (Ali & Bin Munawer, 2017, p.13). This is a relatively low figure, but its significance is that it dictates the level of access to the particular section of the public sphere in which memes, as they are popularly understood nowadays, play a socio-political role. This divide draws a clear line between the respective sectors of society that either textual/verbal or visual memes can take hold, since while textual and verbal memes do not necessarily require sustained internet access in order to achieve virality, the same cannot be said for more visually stimulating viral content.

The second divide is the generational divide, because people of different generations engage with new media on different platforms. For different generations, the medium is part of the message of the meme due to the networks that they are able to access and their degree of relatability. As has been alluded to earlier, Pakistan is currently experiencing a youth bulge. To be more specific, 64 percent of the Pakistani population is below the age of 30, according to Shakeel Ahmad, Chief of the Development Policy Unit of the United Nations Development Programme in Pakistan (2018).

The Memes shared by younger people on Facebook, for example, have a very different structure and typology to those shared by older people on WhatsApp. While the former

exists largely in the form of macros and photos of various forms, the latter are similar in architecture to the meme's older cousin: the chain email. This is not to say that macros, photos, and textual memes do not exist on platforms used by older people, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that they are not as predominant as they are on more youthful platforms.

The final divide that is important to mention is the literacy divide. As of 2016, Pakistan's literacy rate seems to be trending downwards from 58% (Ministry of Finance, 2018). Once again, illiteracy presents a serious roadblock when it comes to accessing the memesphere, which is a very literary area of communication, even if somewhat rudimentary at first glance.

The literacy divide is further entrenched at two levels: urban-rural and gender, which can also be said about the digital divide. While further study is required, this suggests two possible implications. Firstly, that affinity groups based on memes are developing within and encompassing existing groups created by the aforementioned divides, and secondly that the gendered element of the digital and literacy divides may lead to a further entrenchment of misogyny and sexist discourse within the memesphere and subsequently within more material social spaces.

### **The Political and Cultural Impact**

Despite these social and economic divisions, memes do still inhabit an interesting position within the Pakistani political and cultural spheres that is worth analysing. Memes, understood as a disruption to traditional systems of semiotic production, facilitate a phenomenon of political meaning-making from below. This is because the creation or adoption of memes, to a large degree, involves some form of personal appropriation. Marx (1848, p.23) uses the term "personal appropriation" to refer to the ways in which the proletariat reap the benefits of their labour for themselves. In this case, this means that units of mass culture are interpreted and adopted in a way that fits into the context and identity of the consumer or appropriator.

This obscures the intentionality behind the creation of memes, whether as a deliberate or

accidental act, and regardless of the identity or anonymity of the creator or subject. This sort of appropriation can be seen in the different ways sound bites such as *mujhe kyun nikala* and *boss mein ne aapko bola kya hai?* have been repurposed and readapted to fit other contexts while at the same still ridiculing the originators of both lines. Although both may be perceived to have an initial intentionality, subject, speaker, and audience, consumers of the memes are able to use them in situations with entirely different intentions, subjects, speakers, and audiences while maintaining the comedic irony of their original utterance.

Another important political phenomenon that helps us understand the political role of memes in Pakistan is that of sousveillance. Steve Mann (2002) defines sousveillance as the opposite of surveillance; in other words, a form of civilian under sight in contrast to government oversight. In a romantic or idealistic sense, sousveillance as a practice carried out by civilians is meant to prevent state monopolies on power leading to totalitarianism or authoritarianism. This is normally, but not necessarily carried out by using technology to counterbalance the surveillance of powerful institutions.

The advancement of the ability of technology to enhance traditional forms of sousveillance, such as satisfaction surveys carried out by companies or student evaluations carried out at universities, is the main driver behind making sousveillance more publicly accessible. This is represented discursively by memes, wherein the advancement of technology allows expressions of discontent, and particularly those made in humorous ways, to become mass-consumed semiotic products that compete with semiotic products produced by more powerful structures, such as political slogans.

In this regard, it is key to note the role of technology – from the recording technology to the social media websites to the devices through which the meme is consumed – in memeing and promoting statements such as *yeh bik gaye gormint* and *khana khud garam kar lo* in opposition to more established party political slogans. Furthermore, it is important to note how they flip the onus of action back upon the normatively powerful institutions of the government and the patriarchy while

maintaining a sense of watchful anticipation that empowers the actor invoking the meme.

Memes play a key role in every day and informal politics within Pakistan. The discursive sousveillance discussed above fits within a broader concept of quiet encroachment, defined by Iranian-American sociologist Asif Bayat as “the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives” (2013, p.46).

There is no shortage of examples from around the world of memes playing a role in the slow and protracting seizing of public discourses by smaller groups, the most notable among these being the alt-right in the United States. According to Kevin Smith, more robust methods of influencing public discourses, such as social movements, can be described as creating loud encroachment, whereas quiet encroachment is carried out by non-movements and is more difficult to map and observe in real time outside of retrospect. Given the virality and relatability of many memes through their levity, memes serve as both a release valve for public frustrations as well as a means by which resistance to oppressive structures is built up over time by those who have access to them. In this regard, memes become a bathetic intervention to the daily lives of their consumers. That being said, it is still essential to remain vigilant of the socio-economic cleavages within which memes are situated and those which they further entrench.

By moving this analysis from the political to the cultural sphere, it is clear that memes play a key role in the redistribution of cultural capital, as well as in developing a more participatory process of social culture-making, while also raising some important ethical questions. This paper has so far demonstrated the ability of memes to influence Pakistani society both culturally and linguistically. Reflecting this, suddenly access to technology and a well-developed consciousness of humour, are new dictators in the process of developing cultural capital.

This is because these are, at least at a basic level, the important skills and privileges one needs in order to participate in the

memosphere. Added to this, the cross-class buy-in into the culture of sharing popular memes develops an avenue of cross-class cultural exchange. There is however an important criticism to this that must be raised. Namely, that the one-way exchange of cultural units in which the privileged classes only consume rather than contribute may be constitutive of cultural appropriation.

Finally, it is important to consider the role of ethics within the phenomenon of memes in culture-making. Memes can adversely affect their creators as well as their subjects. Often, this is because there is no structure of accountability through which consent can be determined prior to achieving virality, either of the creator or the subject. Two of the most popular subjects of memes in Pakistan in recent years, the chaiwala Arshad Khan from Islamabad and the famed Gormint Auntie Qamar, have faced negative backlashes from within their own families and communities despite their national popularity.

While questions may be raised about the degree to which both individuals consented to being recorded by cameras, it would be very difficult to argue that both individuals were aware of the size of their eventual audiences. Given the gender and class norms that exist within Pakistan, the lack of an ethical framework within the production of memes can become deeply problematic. This differentiates memes from more deliberately produced media products.

### Conclusion

It is clear that, as in many places, memes have come to play an important role in the political and cultural spheres of Pakistan. They are a new form of mass communication brought about by the new capabilities of new media to grant laymen access to procedures of production and publicity that were previously the realm of highly-skilled professionals. In the midst of this positive sentiment, however, it is incumbent upon those engaged in the memosphere to develop their consciousness of the divides that are created and furthered by memes as well as of the ethical considerations underpinning the role that memes play within society.

Further study of both are central to the development of an environment in which

memes play a more productive rather than destructive role in identity and culture building in Pakistan.

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Figure 1. A cover photo of the Saeen to Saeen meme extracted from a popular Facebook that frequently utilises said meme in various contexts. In this context, it is adapting to meme to popular children's show, Tom and Jerry.

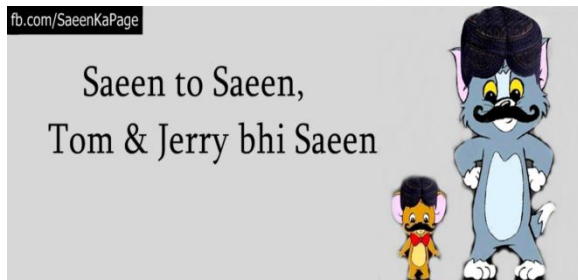


Figure 2. A popular meme demonstrating the use of dil garden garden howa in a comedic way while juxtaposing it with dil ro raha hai mera.



Figure 3. Left: A meme based on the comedic reinterpretation of the popular Che Guevara photo replacing Guevara with the "Gormint Aunty". Right: A protester from the Aurat March in 2018 carrying a poster that says "warm the food yourself".



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