

Fun & Reality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political memes on Social Media (2016–2024)

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Abstract

This study explores the profound relationship of fun and reality by analysing political memes available on different applications on social media through a framework of critical discourse analysis presented by Norman Fairclough known as three dimensional model (3D). Most of the time, reality comes to light in a humorous way in order to lessen or spice up the vibe of the situation. Similarly, memes on social media are fuelling the fun in reality and merging the criticism with entertainment. The purpose of this research is to disclose how meme works as a bridge between discursive patterns and understanding of political scenarios in the public. This study selects and analyses political memes of a selected time period from January 2016 to April 2024 on social media platforms. This study examines political memes with respect to three dimensions such as: textual analysis, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practices. This present research employs a mixed-method strategy and focuses on the fact that political memes uphold or challenge the political situations in a lighter way.

Keywords: Fun, Reality, Political Satire, Memes, Social Media, Critical Discourse Analysis, Humour

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Introduction

Social media platforms have become a crucial space for political discussion nowadays. In this technological world, information, entertainment, and public opinion are very indistinct only because of social media. There are so many online contents. But political memes have become a powerful and widespread tool for expression and persuasion. Most of the memes have humorous and satirical nature. Memes create a great impact on public perceptions and political narratives.

People are not only viewers of memes, but they also create and distribute them. Political memes are a new innovation in electronic media, which are also aligned with wider cultural transition. Participation of individuals in this activity enhances the influence of memes on society. Then, they spread rapidly and reach a larger audience. Political memes have characteristics of brief and sharp commentary. This chief property mirrors and drives public sentiment. Memes also shape opinions and sometimes prompt actions too.

The main objective of this research is to investigate the complex relationship between fun and reality in political memes on various social media apps. Fairclough's 3D model of critical discourse analysis consists of three dimensions; textual practice, discursive practice and social practice. The researcher investigates the linguistic and semiotic components of political memes for getting socio-political understanding. This model of Fairclough is a comprehensive framework which is used for comprehending the influence of discourse on society. It also interprets power dynamics and societal structures like family, education, government and education etc which influence the discourse. Therefore, this model is well suited for examining the dual nature of memes as both entertainment and political discourse.

The aspect of textual analysis inspects the language, imagery, and symbolism employed in the selected political memes for evaluating the political ideas. The aspect of discursive practice analysis delves into the producing, spreading, and consuming the memes on several social media platforms. It also focuses on the intertextuality in memes. It means that some memes are build on previously existing memes or knowledge. Actually, meme culture is a dynamic process. Everyday, many individuals make them and post them in anonymous online communities where the original creator remains unknown most of the time. So, everyone is a contributor. Lastly, the aspect of social practice sees memes within any large socio-political context. It also analyses the political beliefs, power structures and public conversation.

With the help of this analytical framework, the researcher has highlighted the use of political memes for reinforcing, challenging and commenting on ideologies. People present their ideas in memes, they can be criticised, accepted and even neglected. Moreover, this research reveals the form of those discourses in memes and the social dynamics presented in them.

Memes represent political situations happening at national and international level. They portray modern form of politics that is going on social media. This study illuminates dual part of political memes as they are a source of entertainment as well as of information. The examiner comprehends the intricacies and possibilities of political communication in the digital era. Through this study, the researcher tries to learn more about the complexities of political speech in the digital age.

Significance of Study

This research helps in the interpretation of digital political discourse. Because it creates an emphasis on the blending of reality and amusement within the memes. Memes shape the political communication and sentiments of common people. This examination leads both of them. It also underpins the significance of critical thinking in social media literacy. People should not blindly trust on this type of discourse. Only critical and analytical approach can uncover the hidden meanings behind any funny or humorous meme.

Literature Review

Sheikh et al. (2022) have conducted a research on political satire portrayed by memes. Main focus of this research is to critically analyse the political memes on Facebook pages. Facebook works as an essential communicative tool for political scenarios. Through this media, political talks become a source of attention and enjoyment all over the world. Furthermore, satirical memes help non-political people to have an opinion about political issues.

According to another research, memes are those social media messages that communicate humor and satire. Political memes are now used for striving campaigns. The study comes to the conclusion that internet memes are used in political conversations, but they don't have a big effect on the people who watch them. On the other hand, they do make digital natives more interested in politics. They also work as powerful weapons to influence the attitudes of people, to stir a debate and to raise a voice.

Another study examines the intricate world of political memes in order to understand their role as cultural agents (Sultana & Khalid, 2023). This research delves into the complex world of politics by dissecting its complex regulations as a powerful medium for freedom of speech and cultural expression that has a transforming impact on the fabric of political discourse.

The relationship between online memes and human problems is the subject of another research. It claims that viewer decisions and behaviors cause memes to go viral in a matter of minutes. After analyzing YouTube memes, it is determined that the level of audience's attention and worry about a particular incident or problem determines whether or not the meme becomes viral. Memes are created based on content that the creators find more entertaining, engaging, and relevant to the present situation; thus, the audience's consumption and actions determine how and when to utilize them (Shifman, 2011).

According to a study on the functions online memes in formation of opinions, memes can be regarded as the main source of information. Due to the overuse of memes concerning the news, which is a popular and viral medium of data or statistics. Furthermore, this study suggest is that humour may be a useful strategy for disseminating news and information that keeps audiences aware about local and national issues (Lainesk, 2016).

However, as Baumgartner (2013) has shown that political humor can leave an unfavorable impression on viewers. Its main focus is on how political memes spread. A comical portrayal of an influential politician contributes to the poor opinion of other politicians. It demonstrates how memes have the power to change people's perceptions of not just the person they include in them but also of other, non-existent entities.

Another research by Vromen (2016) focuses on humor as a vital component for young people to communicate their feelings about political circumstances. People are more likely to engage with casual and hilarious material, where they may openly express their opinions and engage in social interaction. Comedic elements are crucial when creating political memes to be utilized on online platforms since people find them more believable and enjoyable.

Furthermore, memes employ a variety of tones. Townsend et al. (2008) have conduct an analysis of several memes based on the tone in which they are employed. Tone categories such as sarcastic, descriptive, scathing, unsatisfied, and critical are distinguished in this way. The current state of affairs is portrayed in a descriptive tone without endorsing the ridiculous candidates. To highlight the shortcomings in the governing structure, the sarcastic tone system is criticized. While the divesting

memes demonstrate the necessity for people to take action, the indignant tones involve the desire for immediate change.

Grabe & Bucy (2009) have demonstrated how the use of visual framing in memes might influence voters' decisions. They contend that since the majority of people obtain their information from online sources, it is critical that they understand how visual framing might affect how they see the world. Consequently, the media frames, photos, and visual memes were examined in this study. A fascinating technique to frame a political campaign is to depict the candidate or any other party politician in a relaxed manner visiting local locations, such as factories etc.

Research Methodology

This research work utilizes mixed-method research design & orientational research in nature, utilizing Fairclough's 3D model, a critical discourse analysis approach. This study investigates the themes, narratives, and ideological structures present in political memes on social media. The reason, CDA is selected for analyzing the socio-political aspects of memes is because of its ability to expose the underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and social structures found in texts. These political memes are selected from the Popular social media sites like Pinterest, Google, and Instagram etc. These memes directly refer political personalities, topics, or events. They have a lot of interaction (likes, shares, comments) to guarantee their effect and relevancy. The researcher has also utilised the hashtags, and keywords which have connections to any trending political events while gathering the data.

As various social media sites have different user demographics so, the choice of platforms may have an impact on the results. This methodology presents a thorough strategy for evaluating political memes found on social media. That's why these memes are taken from social media sites such as Instagram, google, Facebook and Pinterest by utilizing convenience sampling. The study uses CDA to investigate the intricate relationship between humor, ideology, and political discourse. The three-dimensional model is developed by Fairclough. It is a significant approach in discourse analysis. Because it provides a thorough framework for analyzing the intricate interactions between language, discourse practices, and social institutions. It also highlights the connections between discourse practice, texts, and socio-cultural contexts. It offers an authentic method of comprehending how language creates and reflects social reality. By using this approach, the researcher finds out hidden meanings, power dynamics, and social inequities within speech. It takes language into account in connection to power, ideology, and social interactions. This

analytical technique provides a greater knowledge of language functions. Language plays different roles in different social situations. Language creates power dynamics and social structures and also created by them. CDA gives the way to examine the impact of memes on public opinion and political narratives.

Data Presentation & Analysis

Textual analysis highlights the literal as well as contextual usage of the meme and focuses on the over socio-political scenarios prevailing in the society.



Figure: 1, Source: Google, April, 2024

An above displayed image portrays the conversation between Election Commission and public where members of the public show their excitement awaiting the results, the Election Commission replies that they too are eager to see them. A conversation using Fairclough's 3D model,

conveys a feeling of mutual expectation and maybe irritation. The reaction from the Election Commission seems to indicate some understanding or recognition of the public's worries. A high degree of interest or stakes in the outcome may be indicated by the public's excitement for the outcomes. The Election Commission's answer may indicate that they are conscious of the public's expectations and the significance of accurate and fast results. The public's and the Election Commission's power dynamics may be highlighted by this exchange. While the public voices their expectation, the Election Commission's reaction suggests a degree of power and accountability by positioning them as the authority in charge of presenting the results. In short, this image describes the situation prevailing at the time of result announcement.



Figure: 2, Source: Instagram

This current meme shows two person: Zardari and his son where he is instructing his son to wave to the public just because they have sponsored his education expenses at a higher institute. This image is a satire over the elite class's power, unfair advantages and justice. Reality is explained in an humorous way in order to lessen the effects over the society as people enjoy humour. It is critically analysed by Fairclough 's three dimensional model at different levels such as literal meaning, discourse practice and

socio political or cultural scenarios as language generates a situation while situation generates language too at a surface level. This meme diverts attention towards social injustice and class discrepancies at upper level, showcases how elite class people take advantages in order to fulfil their pocket and pinpoints the social injustice. In a humorous way, how hidden things come to light and this way provides grounds to share a person's perspective on any concern etc.

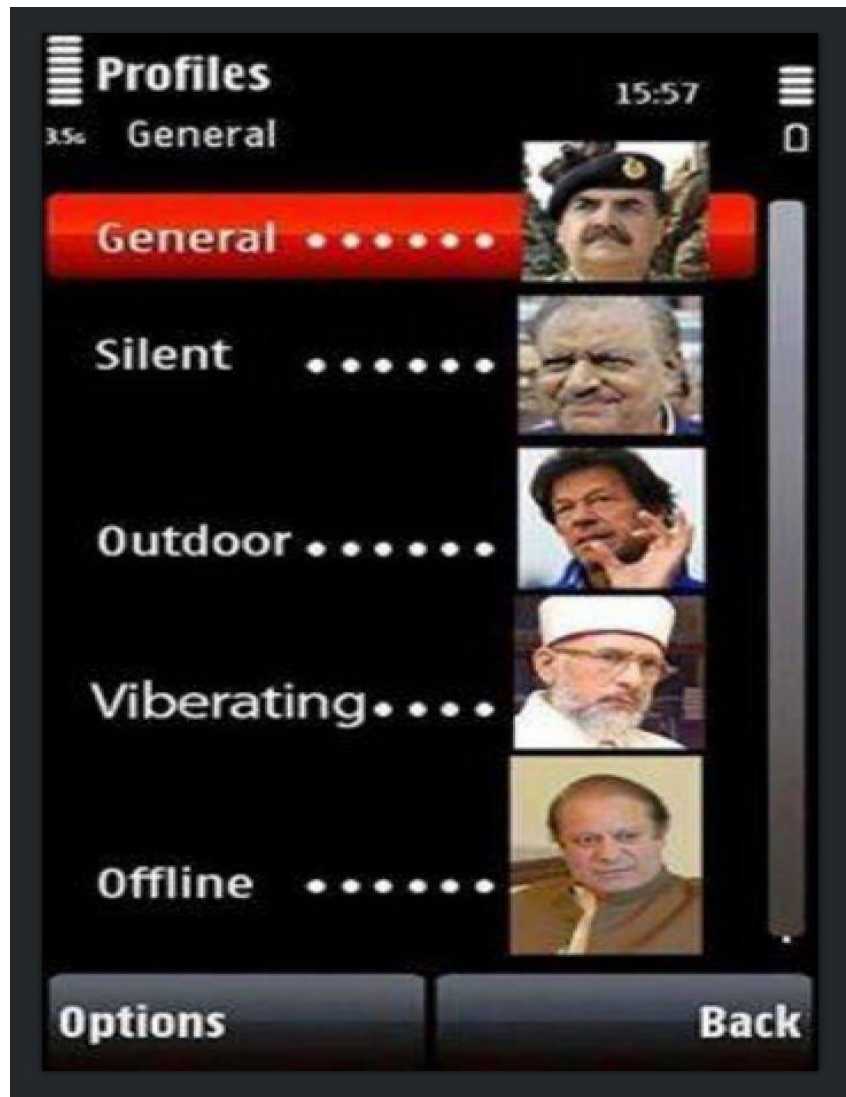


Figure: 3, Source: Google

This image metaphorically describes the political statuses or behaviours of major political leaders in Pakistan by using the varied states of a mobile phone. This meme is analyzed by using Fairclough's 3D model of Critical discourse analysis. The armed forces are represented by this state. The military is implied to be active and present in the metaphor, which probably means that it is in control or influence. While silent situation, describes the spokesperson for an unidentified politician. This might include to maintain caution, making no public announcements or appearances, or working behind the scenes. On the other hand, Outdoor scenario, where Imran Khan is represented by this state. While vibrating state is referring to a person who is in touch on and off and the last state offline refer towards Nawaz Sharif which reveals lack of presence or less interest in an activity. This picture makes use of mobile phone states to offer a complex and multi-layered commentary on the functions and actions of many political organizations and figures in Pakistan. This meme describes multiple layers of action, and activity by the actors in the political circumstances by drawing comparisons through digital technology in order to make complex decisions or works further accessible and understandable. Every feature of a mobile phone is describing a state of popularity among public and criticizes people.



Figure: 4, Source: Google

The following metaphorical image shows a person who is holding and loading a gun, while text is written in both English and Urdu, which pinpoints a strong message about the behaviours and actions of few people about Pakistan's economy. First of all, the written text in the image reveals that instead of focusing on the development and stability of country's economy, people focus on noise massacre that happens on 14th August. It criticises the sense of patriotism of people that, they feel proud in doing these actions such as to plug out the silencer of the bike on Independence day to showcase their enjoyment and enthusiasm. It diverts the attention towards the stability of economy of the country. It pinpoints that economy does not need such kind of useless acts rather it demands solid steps to stand in the race of developed countries. The analogy among economic issues and useless gestures is pinpointed by implication of satire and dissatisfaction. It highlights that such kind of actions are not meant for the welfare of people or nation. This image shows that specific contribution in matters of nation such as the economy is lacking. People neglects significant economic concerns and reflects symbolic gestures of patriotism. The following picture displays a metaphor to highlight the contrast between few actions that prevail in the society and important matters such as the current situation of economic stability.

"ap itni door door bethay hain, ap k beech bhi pul bana doon?"



Figure: 5, Source: Google

The following image portrays a person, Shehbaz Sharif who is an official of government, is addressing army officers who are seated far from one another. This image metaphorically highlights the action of construction

of railways, roads and bridges. The following image presents the scenario of a formal seminar or meeting in which Prime Minister is delivering a speech. The officials of army are there but they are seated apart which may highlight literal or figurative distance. This statement sheds light on the point of view that the military officers' separation from one another, suggesting that the prime minister is ready to fill distance or lack of communication. Apart from its humorous satire the sentence may hint a wish to reduce gaps and foster connections and communication among people or institutions. The picture describes how Pakistan's government and the military establishment are on one page by portraying a formal exchange between the Prime Minister and the military officials. The reality is explained in an effective way through humour.



Figure: 6, Source: Instagram

This selected image sets out as a metaphor for Pakistan's political system, through a complex game named as: Snake and Ladder which showcases a significant notion that those who seems to be climbing up to the top are halted by court judgements. Employing Fairclough's 3D model, it may be interpreted as follows: political advancements and role of legal interventions. This image serves as a critique of Pakistan's political success's unpredictability, shows a deep connection between court and politics. The metaphor shed lights on how judicial rulings provide abrupt

and sudden defeats for people. It presents a notion that those people who are near to achieve success are let down by the judiciary's role in politics. This game used as a metaphor that draws attention towards unstable politics in Pakistan. This may highlight the deep coated roots of law in politics that court rulings have a significant impact on politics in positive as well as negative aspects. This image presents a criticism over the political system by describing the unexpected of court decisions and their influence on political system. It presents the conflict between politics and the law. In short, focuses on the views of justice and discrepancies in the political system of Pakistan.



Figure: 7, Source: Google

The following picture features a famous politician, Asif Ali Zardari along with a satirical caption while picture of Asif Ali Zardari shows confidence or enjoyment and fun. This image comments on the political campaign strategies of this personality by mocking that people do campaign before elections while he does after election. This written description draws attention towards the political campaign strategies and tricks versus traditional strategies for political campaigning. The laughing emoji in this picture have an ironic tone. It ironically highlights or sheds light on the

strategies of Zardari. It reveals that Zardari is more active than other politicians after the election as the majority of the politicians work hard day and night, doing campaigns before the election in order to win while he does not play in the court like them. This picture reflects public reviews about his campaign of election's strategies and his impression over the public as smart and active politicians who have power. This meme implies indirectly that his way of work or politics is notably different from other politicians while criticism prevailing in the image makes it more interesting by adding laughing emoji in it which shows the traditional way of satire for political scenarios as it is understood that emoji adds up the spice in the market of emotions and feelings.



Figure: 8, Source: Google

This picture features Maulana Fazlur Rahman, a political figure in the political system of Pakistan. As, this picture consists of two things: one is a sweet dish and other one is the personality who is the lover of that specific sweet dish. He is a great admirer of it, on the other hand, this picture describes the price of this desert has a connection with the inflation, this specific personality is showing his love by focusing on the reasonable price of sweet dish. Basically, this narrative displays his point of view on global inflation with a exaggerated response to possible hike in the price

of this sweet desert which highlights the priorities of this figure. The text in this picture criticizes that he has more concern with the cost of this desert rather than the economic problems of Pakistan's economy. It discloses that he is more interested in his personal or in significant matters rather than the important economic condition of Pakistan that has impact on public. Through this meme, it is understood that the public find humour and satire as this sweet dish is considered as a prominent cultural dish in Pakistan. So, this matter for has greater significance. It also presents the scenario that leadership has their own priorities rather than the profits of their country. This meme is analysed using three dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. Humour and satire in this picture lessens the effect of criticism.



Figure: 9, Source: Instagram April,2019

The following meme displays the relationship between Jahangir Tareen, Asad Umar, and Imran Khan following the election. This visual representation presents the scenario after the elections between these personalities. It is seen that Imran Khan is sitting on a sofa while Asad Umar is seated on large sofa that shows that he has much popularity among the people or public while Jahangir Tareen has not gained recognition. As after election, the time frame and the list of selected candidates is finalized. The language and image shows a drastic change in the interpersonal relationship

of these political figures after the election and it also suggests that solid unity and ties which were their strength is now broken down. This picture also shows the internal party changes that happened after the election which is a significant and crucial moment in selection of candidates.

Conclusion

This article enhances understanding of the function of political memes in modern digital era and stresses over the need of employing critical discourse analysis models, like Fairclough's 3D model, to analyse the depth of hidden dynamics of digital communication. This study paves a new pathway for examining the deep-coated connection between humor, ideology, and power in the digital era, by filling the gap among language, critical discourse analysis and social theory. Moreover, the use of Fairclough's 3D model has displayed that how important it is to investigate the dialectical relation between subject to employ all structures, and discourse while examining digital communication. The researcher focuses on the ideology and power structures that influence the initiative, dissemination, and reception of political memes on social media platforms by picking a critical stance. To make it short, this study advances knowledge of the function of political memes and stresses over the need of using CDA models like Fairclough's 3D model in order to examine the complex dynamics of online communication. This study paves a new pathway for examining the deep coated connection between humor, ideology, and power in the digital era, by filling the gap among language, critical discourse analysis and social theory.

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