

# Between Humor and Harm: Political Memes and Their Effects on Youth's Political Efficacy

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** This study analyzed the content of political memes created and shared by Pakistani youth and then investigated the influence of these memes on their political efficacy.

**Methodology:** We employed mixed methods and did a reflexive thematic analysis of 103 political memes. A survey of 408 respondents who viewed, shared, and created political memes on social media was also conducted to investigate the effects of political memes on their political efficacy.

**Findings:** Thematic analysis yielded three themes: “humiliation, reality check, and political exploitation”. Meme creators humiliate any political party or politician by criticizing, mocking, and insulting them in their memes. These political memes were sarcastic and negative, showing distrust and a low efficacy among meme creators and users. The results of the survey indicated that exposure to memes and sharing them were neither related nor significantly associated with political efficacy. However, perceived credibility regarding political memes was negatively correlated with political efficacy.

**Conclusion:** The quantitative and qualitative results indicate that memes are neither detrimental nor helpful to political efficacy. Although they might create awareness among people and generate conversation, receiving them as true source of political information without verification could lead to lower political efficacy.

**Keywords:** Political Memes, Political Efficacy, Thematic Analysis.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Memes are user-generated content that often become viral on different social media apps. They are used as a form of expression and communication (Reime, 2015). Memes have become a source of political expression for common citizens (Shifman, 2013), not only for those who create them but also for others. Memes have been popular in Pakistan, and regarding every serious issue or fun event, humorous memes have become viral (Niazi, 2024). Pakistan is also a democracy in continuous transition, and we can see the youth's involvement in creating memes to express their political views. In some studies, social media usage has been associated with a higher level of political polarization (Tucker et al., 2018) and a lower level of political trust and efficacy (Ahmed & Masood, 2024). For a struggling democracy like Pakistan,

it is essential to analyze the content of political memes created by its youth and then investigate the influence of these memes on its users in terms of their political efficacy. For this purpose, we have reviewed the following literature.

### ***1.1. Political Memes***

A meme is a social unit passed down through the ages by imitation. Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, used the word 'meme' in his famous book, "The Selfish Gene", in 1976. The human gene is the replicator in humans. Using the same analogy, he created a similar word for a replicator in ideas and concepts, and chose the word 'meme'. He further explained it as an idea that "leaps from brain to brain" just like a natural genetic trait. 'Meme' also conveniently fits in the environment by forming a cluster (Mermelstein, 2016). Memes are also "artifacts of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

While memes appear to be developed and circulated for amusement, they may also be used to provide commentary on serious problems. A person may be able to articulate deep-seated opinions and worries using memes (Bulatovic, 2019). These memes become more relevant when used in political contexts and transform into a means of political expression in digital spaces (Leiser, 2022). Political memes are contentious graphic writings that are widely seen on social media. A political meme focuses on any political or social issue, political actor, or event by using a clever blend of visuals and text. The contagious nature of political memes makes them influential in public discourse and opinions, and contributes to their effectiveness (Elmore & Coleman, 2019). Memes have become a significant part of political commentary (Anastasia Denisova, 2019), and political memes typically play the role of activist, with the goal of "promoting political ideological beliefs or denigrating political opponents" (Bauckhage, 2011). Memes created during political campaigns generate community perception and are primarily used as a propagandist tool (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019). Numerous researchers have lauded the contribution of memes towards political communication as a means of expressing governmental critique or democratic dissent (Al Zidjaly, 2017; Huntington, 2016; Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016). Hence, we want to investigate the themes prevalent in the memes shared in the context of Pakistani politics.

### ***1.2. Political Memes and Political Efficacy***

Political humor brings politics "closer to citizens" and makes it easier to understand politicians' behavior and goals (Ferré-Pavia et al., 2016). Studies demonstrate that sarcastic programming, as a type of mainstream entertainment, can produce knowledgeable, critical-thinking, politically engaged individuals (Jones, 2010). Memes have also evolved into "multiparticipant online content" (Nowak, 2016), which effectively communicates messages and influences users as per their context and experience (Arrobo-Agila et al., 2025). Studies have found significant effects on political engagement and participation when people are exposed to political memes. These effects are more visible for disengaged groups (Ahmed & Masood, 2024). Other studies, however, established that despite having minimal effects, memes do influence partisans significantly, increasing their polarization (Galipeau, 2023), as the memes that become viral address partisan issues (Collier et al., 2024).

Political meme exposure is also closely associated with the political interests and the political engagement of its users. Individuals who share and pass around political memes are more active in both offline and online political activities and tend to have greater political efficacy (Johann, 2022). Political efficacy is a person's belief in comprehending political processes and controlling them. It consists of two major dimensions: internal efficacy and external efficacy (Campbell et al., 1954; Niemi et al., 1991). Internal political efficacy is the belief that an individual can participate in politics (Craig et al., 1990). External political efficacy, however, defines a perception that government institutions and political officials are responsive to the actions and demands of ordinary citizens (Niemi et al., 1991). Combined, these two dimensions affect people's perception of their role and efficiency in political life.

Social media provides users with access to a plethora of political information, opinions, and discussion arenas, which can develop political learning and personal competence, augmenting internal political efficacy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Yet, external political efficacy is more complicated in its relation to social media usage. While greater engagement with political elites or citizen campaigns on social media can increase perception that the government pays attention (Cho et al., 2009), users can also get disillusioned through what they perceive as government inertia or disinformation, thus decreasing external efficacy (Lee & Xenos, 2019).

Additionally, research suggests that political memes and user-generated content can indirectly influence efficacy. Memes, for instance, can mock or ridicule political figures and institutions in a manner that also mobilizes or polarizes youth audiences (Ahmed & Masood, 2024). This lighthearted, accessible media can enhance internal efficacy by making politics more accessible, but possibly lower external efficacy by highlighting government ineptness or corruption (Highfield, 2017). Both external and internal political efficacy are essential to democratic participation. Social media can heighten political knowledge and participation, particularly among young citizens, thereby increasing internal efficacy. However, whether these media also increase a sense of institutional trust—external efficacy—hinges considerably on the manner of political discussion online and how institutions react to public opinion. Therefore, based on the discussed literature, we hypothesized:

H1: People who share or are regularly exposed to political memes have a lower level of political efficacy.

H2: People who consider political memes more credible have a lower level of political efficacy.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods. We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to explore the topics and themes of political memes. The effect of these memes on the political efficacy of youth was determined through a survey method.

### ***2.1. Thematic Analysis***

For the thematic analysis, we selected 103 political memes from social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram, X, and Google. The criterion for selection was the popularity of memes in the form of their comments and shares. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a process that helps to identify, organize, and provide perspectives (themes) via data. We employed the inductive method of coding and looked for similarities among them to develop themes for analysis. To develop codes and common themes, we scrutinized the data and completed the same six steps as defined by Braun and Clarke: familiarization, generating codes, developing themes, refining themes, giving names to the themes, and writing a report.

### ***2.2. Survey***

We surveyed the young adults aged 18-35 using a closed-ended questionnaire. We focused on youngsters since they are mainly engaged social media users in terms of propagating, generating, and watching memes. Youth are proactively utilizing new media to disseminate information and express their political views through the production of memes. A total of 408 respondents filled out the questionnaire.

A closed-ended questionnaire served as the primary data collection technique. Questions using a five-point Likert scale and demographic data served as its foundation. We asked respondents about their gender, education, meme exposure, and consumption. They were also asked about their political ideology, interest in politics, and understanding of political issues. In addition to these, the other questions focused on the credibility of political memes and political efficacy.

#### ***2.2.1. Meme Consumption Pattern***

In order to determine meme exposure and consumption, we asked one question for each. For exposure, respondents were asked how often they encounter memes. For consumption, they were asked if they

create, share, or view memes only. We added the responses to these two questions to know the meme consumption pattern. The maximum score for meme consumption was 7, while the minimum was 2. The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was .719.

### **2.2.2. Credibility of Political Memes**

Trustworthiness or Credibility is defined as the attribute of an individual or item that inspires trust. A participant is more likely to consider political memes as an acceptable way of communicating; in that case, the attitude towards political memes is assumed to be positive. If a user is not content with political memes, then the user's attitude towards political memes will be considered negative. We asked seven questions to measure the credibility of political memes. Seven questions used a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, while one out of seven questions had three options. Using an additive scale, we computed seven questions, with a maximum score of 33 and a minimum score of 7. The highest score of 33 meant higher credibility of political memes, and a low score of 7 indicated lower credibility. Cronbach's alpha of credibility of the political meme was 0.685.

### **2.2.3. Political Efficacy**

The most widely used scale for measuring political efficacy comes from the work of Niemi et al. (1991). We used their questions related to external efficacy only. There were a total of five questions with five-point Likert scale options. Using an additive scale, we got a maximum score (25) and a minimum score (05). The highest score (25) is considered as high efficacy, and the lowest score (05) regarded as less efficacy of respondents. Cronbach's alpha of credibility of the political meme was 0.668.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

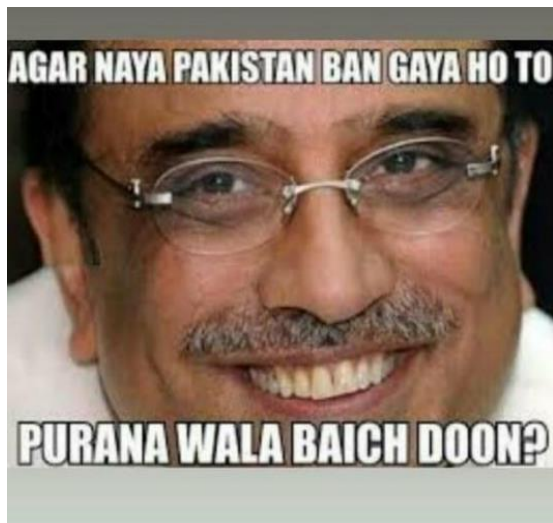
### **3.1. Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis of 103 memes resulted in the identification of the following themes:

#### **3.1.1. Humiliation**

The theme of "Humiliation", as portrayed in the memes, captures a presentation of disrespect and dishonor, usually through mockery of one's intelligence. The memes with this theme are full of an aggressive and confrontational tone that underlies much of social media-based political discourse. They capture how users, especially young users, convey criticism for different political parties and personalities. In these memes, politicians and political parties are ridiculed, criticized, and insulted, reflecting deep-seated societal divisions and a culture of political rivalry within Pakistan's cyberspace.

**Fig. 3.1.**



In Fig. 3.1, the theme of humiliation can be seen, as this meme targets the current president of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari, about his corruption in Pakistan. This humor is blended with one of the most famous slogans of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), “*Naya Pakistan*” (New Pakistan). Meme says that if a new Pakistan has been created, should I sell the old one? This meme employs sarcasm and humor to attack both the previous political establishment (Zardari) and the reformist hope of (Naya Pakistan) of PTI, implying that genuine change has not occurred enough so that one might sarcastically provide to "sell" the old one like stale inventory.

### 3.1.2. Reality Check

“Reality check” here represents the political distrust in a witty manner to make people aware of the current political situation in Pakistan. These memes challenge the narratives of all political parties and attempt to create a realization among their followers that none of the parties has been loyal to Pakistan and its people. These memes also focused on inflation and corruption allegedly done by the Pakistani politicians. Fig. 3 .2 illustrates the reality check theme, showing the transition from “before” to “after” the PTI’s rule as the ruling party from 2018 to 2022. Through mockery, this meme portrays how the PTI government raised the inflation rate for the public after getting into government, but they used to revolt and protest against the same inflation before being ruling party. After coming into authority, they changed the statement that the government is unable to control inflation. Thus, this meme shows the reality check and portray political distrust in politicians

Fig. 3.2.



### 3.1.3. Manipulation

The theme “Manipulation” refers to the way politicians alter public opinion by accusing rival political parties, as well as by justifying and legitimizing their actions and those of their political party. In this way, they manipulate the public’s attitude toward the socio-political situation.

Fig. 3.3.



This meme in Fig. 3.3 relates Pakistan's political situation to the famous poem of "Pied Piper" by Robert Browning. It analogizes the Pakistani nation to the mice, and the politicians and dictators to the Pied Piper. In the poem, Pied Piper used to play flute to hypnotize the mice, and here in this meme, the flute tune has been called *ISLAM KHATRE MAIN HAI* (Islam is in danger). Most of the dictators and politicians have used Islam as a tactic to manipulate the people of the country. In this meme, the manipulation is presented in a relatable and funny way to criticize the public and accuse the authorities.

### 3.2. Results of the Survey

The respondents included in this survey belonged to the 16-35 years age group, among which 52.45% were female, and 46.57% were male respondents. 4.17% were intermediate students, 0.98% were matric, 36.52% were post-graduate, and 58.33% were undergraduate students who completed the survey. 68.87% of respondents classified their political ideology as moderate, 18.38% said they were conservative, and 12.75% of respondents considered themselves liberal. 42.16% of the respondents reported having a great interest in politics, 17.89% of respondents were somewhat interested, 35.54% of respondents said somewhat disinterested in politics, while 4.41% were extremely disinterested in politics.

Multiple linear regression was used to test whether meme consumption, meme credibility, gender, education, political knowledge, political interest, and political ideology explain political efficacy. The regression model was overall significant,  $F(8, 400) = 12.486, p < .001$ , and accounted for about 17.9% of the variance in political efficacy ( $R^2 = .179$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .165$ ). Among the predictors, meme credibility strongly and negatively predicted political efficacy,  $\beta = -.25, t = -4.305, p < .001$ . Gender was a predictor, with females reporting lower levels than males,  $\beta = -.28, t = -4.06, p < .001$ . Education positively predicted political efficacy ( $\beta = .13, t = 2.48, p = .013$ ). Political ideology ( $\beta = .053, p = .324$ ), political understanding ( $\beta = -.021, p = .773$ ), and political interest ( $\beta = .042, p = .588$ ) were not significant predictors in this model. Meme consumption pattern was also not a statistically significant predictor of political efficacy,  $\beta = -.11, t = -1.968, p = .050$ . Multicollinearity was evaluated with VIF and Tolerance measures. All the variables fell within acceptable limits ( $VIF < 5$ ).

While it was predicted that high levels of exposure to political memes would be correlated with political efficacy (H1), the regression test did not confirm this relationship. Contrary to initial expectations, the frequency of exposure and sharing of political memes was not associated with political efficacy in any way. These findings do not align with Johann (2022), who reported that meme usage was positively related to motivations for political engagement and internal political efficacy. The findings validated H2 and showed that those who view political memes as a credible source of information had lower levels of

political efficacy. This is consistent with fears that excessive reliance on casual, user-created political material could damage political confidence and enhance disengagement with formal political processes. Research on media credibility also suggests that trusting memes may undermine deeper political reasoning (Karduni et al., 2023). Perceived credibility of memes, rather than mere exposure to them, has a significant influence on political attitudes. Results of our thematic analysis of the political memes had already established that political memes humiliate the politicians, mock the government, and show distrust in the political system. When people start believing in these types of memes, they become skeptical of their political system and its efficacy. This indicates that how individuals assess memes is more important than how frequently they encounter or share them. Together, these findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between exposure to political memes and belief in their informational accuracy. Memes exposure alone is not associated with engagement, it is uncritical acceptance of memes that may hinder the development of informed political efficacy.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In this study, a mixed-methods design was adopted to investigate the link between political memes and political efficacy in the context of Pakistan's digital environment. Thematic analysis of political memes revealed the way that memes shape political discourse. Three themes were most prominent: humiliation, in which political leaders were mocked or delegitimized through satire; reality check, in which memes point out contradictions and failings in the exercise of power; and political exploitation, in which memes reveal abuse of power, corruption, or manipulation by the elite. These themes show how memes are not only humorous but also serve as tools for critique and political commentary.

Quantitative survey responses indicated that meme exposure and sharing activities were neither related (disconfirming H1) nor significantly associated with political efficacy. However, perceived credibility regarding political memes was negatively correlated with political efficacy (supporting H2). These results indicate that trust in meme content, not mere exposure, could erode people's confidence in being able to comprehend and engage in political process.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative results indicate that memes are not necessarily damaging or helpful to political competence. Although they might make people aware and generate conversation, receiving them as true source of political information without verification could lead to lower political efficacy. This study adds to emerging scholarship in digital political communication in the Global South by demonstrating that memes are more than light-hearted objects, but texts imbued with meaning and impacting public opinion. Future research might explore the emotional and ideological framing of political memes and their reception among varying demographic groups.

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