

Rhythm of Political Semiotics: Analyzing TikTok's Influence on Pakistan's Political Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study aimed to investigate the influence of TikTok (TT) reels on shaping political narratives for Pakistani political parties in the contemporary era of pervasive social media.

Methodology: Grounded in semiotics theory by Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes, the research conducted a meticulous semiotic analysis of TT reels from major political parties (PTI, PMLN, PPP). Purposive sampling of nine reels decodes explicit and implicit political messages through symbols, audio, and visuals. Additionally, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) and semi-structured interviews with fifty respondents offer nuanced insights.

Findings: The discourse analysis of semiotic-rich TikTok reels by Pakistani political parties (PTI's religious-nationalistic fusion, PMLN's emotive appeals, and PPP's governance showcases tailored to resonate with distinct audience sentiments) revealed strategic use of symbols to shape narratives and engage audiences, addressing research questions. While some viewers exhibit disinterest, others engage with specific narratives, highlighting the complexity of digital political communication. Interview responses underscore the modest impact of TikTok reels on political perspectives, affirming the platform's function primarily as a communication tool rather than a decisive influencer of public opinion.

Conclusion: This study unveiled the dynamic synergy between social media and politics, offering pivotal insights into evolving political communication strategies. The call for expanded research, integrating audience reception analysis, and leveraging technological advancements, highlights the study's forward-looking perspective in navigating the evolving terrain of digital political communication.

Keywords: TikTok, Political Narratives, Semiotics Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Media, Political Communication, Pakistani Political Parties, Audience Reception, Digital Engagement.

Introduction

The evolution of social media has profoundly reshaped global communication, with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram playing pivotal roles in shaping public opinion and spacing hedonic

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consumption (Abbasi, et al., 2023) in the political domain. However, the rise of TikTok marks a revolutionary transformation in the convergence of politics and digital media. Unlike its predecessors, TikTok's short-form videos cater to the fast-paced consumption habits of a generation immersed in information overload (Karimi & Fox, 2023), making it a distinct player in digital politics (Tariq, et al., 2022). This transformation aligns with a crucial period where political parties strive for innovative ways to engage an increasingly interconnected and distractible electorate. TikTok's influence extends to Pakistan, a nation marked by a vibrant political tapestry. Political entities wield unprecedented influence through unconventional media channels (Bossetta, 2023; Rastrilla, et al., 2023; (Cervi, 2023). Leveraging TikTok's visual and auditory immediacy, parties can employ potent symbols and narratives, sidestepping traditional media gatekeeping functions (Shoemaker, 1991).

TikTok's introduction in Pakistan, where political campaigning traditionally relied on in-person interactions and conventional media, presents an uncharted territory for academic exploration. First, it sheds light on the evolving nature of political communication in an era dominated by visual elements, auditory cues, and concise messaging. Second, it recognizes Pakistan's cultural nuances, where symbols and narratives hold profound significance, shaping public sentiment.

Moreover, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the efficacy of social media as a political expression tool (Burgess, et al., 2021; Fordyce, 2021) in nations with intricate sociopolitical contexts. As political entities increasingly embrace TikTok to engage with the public, understanding semiotic tactics becomes imperative (Chen & Shu, 2023; Siek & Fariz, 2023). These tactics not only reflect individual communication patterns but also mirror the cultural and political climate of the nation.

Furthermore, this study addresses a notable gap in the current literature; an insufficient examination of the semiotic aspects of political content on TikTok in the Pakistani context and its evident influence on political campaigns on audiences still underexplored. The research aims to bridge this gap by comprehensively analyzing the signs, symbols, and messages crafted by Pakistani political parties specifically on TikTok (Gui, 2023; Kaye, et al., 2022). Two aspects define this research problem: understanding the semiotic language in digital political communication and discerning the implications of these messages on the young generation's political perspectives within a socio-political framework marked by entrenched traditions and rapid modernization.

Research Objectives

1. To uncover and analyze the prevailing signs and symbols in TikTok content of Pakistani political parties for a nuanced understanding of digital political communication.
2. To examine the interweaving of cultural, religious, and historical narratives in TikTok political messages, discerning their significance in the Pakistani socio-political context.
3. To investigate the influence and reception of TikTok's semiotic strategies by Pakistani political parties, specifically assessing their impact on the youth demographic.

Research Questions

1. What signs and symbols dominate TikTok reels by Pakistani political parties, and how are they strategically utilized for constructing impactful political narratives?
2. In what ways do semiotic elements in TikTok content reflect Pakistan's socio-political context and adapt to resonate with cultural nuances?
3. How do semiotic strategies on TikTok affect audience engagement, especially among the youth, and contribute to the dissemination of political messages within this demographic?

Literature Review

TikTok is a rapidly growing social media platform with over one billion active monthly users (Dean, 2023), and 25.2 million users in Pakistan according to *Social Media in Pakistan - 2023 Stats & Platform Trends* emphasizing its unique role in shaping political discourse, focus on identity construction, stereotype perpetuation, challenges, and the intricate roles of its influencers (Gosztonyi, 2023; Hale, et al., 2024).

Optimal TikTok lengths initially of 11-17 seconds were favored, but by late 2021, 24-31 seconds gained traction. Though TikTok allows 10-minute videos, shorter content (7-15 seconds) remains a community preference. While shorter capture attention, context-driven longer videos (1 minute or more) have their place (Johnson, 2021; Sihag, 2023).

In Pakistan, where social media significantly influences political engagement, TikTok emerges as a significant arena for the expression and shaping of political identity (Gramigna & Madisson, 2023; Wright, 2021). TikTok's algorithmic content promotion intensifies the visibility of political narratives, influencing viewers' perceptions and potentially shaping political identity (Arshad & Khurram, 2020). The platform's interactive features, including hashtags and challenges, facilitate active engagement, allowing users to affiliate with specific narratives (Zytoon & Husain, 2023). However, concerns are raised about oversimplification and misinformation due to TikTok's emphasis on brief content (Ertuna, 2023; Filibeli & Özbek, 2023; Berry, 2024).

The representation of political groups on TikTok and associated stereotypes carries implications for public opinion. The platform's visual and auditory elements enable political actors to convey messages through cultural symbols and language. Despite its potential for challenging stereotypes and providing a space for marginalized voices, there are concerns about misrepresentation and the rapid spread of one-sided narratives (Grimwood, 2023; Lee, 2022; Farooq & Ashraf, 2022).

The theoretical framework, rooted in semiotics, guides the study's approach to decoding the complex messages within political TikTok reels of three major parties: PTI, PMLN, and PPP. In the world of signs and symbols, Umberto Eco (1979) takes us on a safari of how linguistic elements communicate. Friedman and Thellefsen (2011) delve into the colorful realm of conceptual semiotics, while Moriarty (2004) decodes the language of visuals in "Picture Talk." Lepschy (1977) offers a beginner's guide in "Signs 101," and Chandler (2022) simplifies the semiotic ABCs. Scholes (1982) acts as a detective, exploring the meaning behind signs in "Decode & Understand." Genosko (2016) investigates the emotional side of signs in "Semiotics Detective."

Deely (1990) unveils the secrets of signs in "Signs Unveiled," and Tresnasari (2020) embarks on an animated adventure in "Anime Signs Adventure." Erton (2018) guides us through "Talking Signs," exploring how signs facilitate communication. Abakumova et al. (2021) study communication without words in "Signs without Words." Agustia (2018) dissects the language of advertising in "Ad Signs Story." Barthes (1968) leads us through narratives filled with signs in "Signs in Stories." Peirce (1878) introduces us to "Thinking Signs," emphasizing the cognitive role of signs while Saussure (1916) introduced "structuralist linguistics and sign theory". Finally, Gramigna & Madisson (2023) provide a contemporary update on the world of signs in "Signs Now and Later."

Problem Statement

Against the backdrop of a significant gap in scholarly literature regarding the semiotic dimensions of political content on TikTok within Pakistan, this study addresses the pressing need to comprehend the intricate processes shaping political narratives in the digital age. By integrating Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with semi-structured interviews, the research aims to explore the profound impact of semiotic constructions on political communication strategies employed by Pakistani political parties. Through a multifaceted approach, the study endeavors to bridge this gap by unraveling the complex interplay between language, power, and digital engagement, thus offering valuable insights into

the evolving dynamics of political discourse on TikTok. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the socio-political landscape in Pakistan while addressing the specific objectives of cataloging semiotic elements, interpreting their significance within the socio-political milieu, assessing audience reception, and contrasting strategies across political entities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study offers a critical perspective on how signs and symbols shape political communication on TikTok within the Pakistani context. Drawing from seminal works by Barthes (1968) and Saussure (1916), semiotic theory elucidates the process by which meaning is conveyed through various signifiers, such as words, images, and sounds. Specifically tailored to the dynamic format of TikTok, this research examines how political messages are condensed into impactful videos, utilizing visual and auditory signs to influence viewers (Eco, 1979). By unraveling the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions of TikTok content, this theoretical framework offers a systematic approach to decode the complexities of TikTok reels, shedding light on their profound impact on political discourse and identity formation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts semiotic analysis combined with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) and semi-structured interviews. This methodological choice allows for a comprehensive exploration of TikTok's impact on political communication and identity formation in Pakistan, capturing both textual and contextual dimensions.

Data Selection

TikTok reels from major Pakistani political parties (PTI, PMLN, PPP) serve as the primary data source for this study. Reels were manually curated based on predefined criteria to ensure relevance and quality, focusing on their political content and engagement metrics.

Population

The population of interest comprises TikTok users in Pakistan, particularly those engaging with political content on the platform. Additionally, participants for semi-structured interviews were purposively sampled to include individuals representing diverse demographics and political affiliations.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select TikTok reels and interview participants, ensuring the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to political communication on TikTok.

Semiotic Analysis

The analysis involves two stages: denotative analysis and connotative analysis. The denotative analysis focuses on the visual and auditory elements of TikTok reels, examining explicit messages conveyed through appearance, attire, gestures, and sound. The connotative analysis delves deeper into the socio-political context, interpreting the implicit meanings and ideologies embedded in the reels.

Analysis

Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a structured framework for analyzing the textual aspects of TikTok reels, uncovering the underlying power relations and ideological discourses present in political communication. Semi-structured interviews complement the textual analysis by providing nuanced insights into audience perceptions and reception of political content on TikTok.

Operationalization of Key Concepts

Key concepts such as political communication, identity formation, and semiotics are operationalized through the systematic examination of TikTok reels, guided by theoretical frameworks and analytical techniques. Each concept is operationalized to facilitate a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the data.

Results and Discussion

Reel No. 1: "Peace returns! #the era of Nawaz Sharif"

In the realm of digital political communication, particularly on platforms like TikTok, how political narratives are constructed and disseminated holds immense significance. Reel No. 1, titled "Peace returns! #the era of Nawaz Sharif," uploaded by the account PMLN OFFICIAL on 21-10-2023, serves as a vivid example of this phenomenon (Figure 1). This reel has achieved a notable presence online, amassing an impressive 19.5 million views and 1.5 million likes, reflecting its wide reach and impact.



Figure 1: PMLN Reel no: 1

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements:

1. **Nawaz Sharif's Presence:** Positioned at Minar Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif emanates authority in formal attire, indicating the event's significance.
2. **Pigeons Landing:** Two or three pigeons alight gracefully on Sharif's hands, creating a visually compelling image with calm symbolism.
3. **Crowd and Setting:** A sizable gathering at Minar Pakistan signifies the event's national importance.
4. **Facial Expressions and Body Language:** Sharif exhibits solemnity and confidence, accentuated by symbolic pigeon interaction.

Auditory Elements:

1. **Speech:** Sharif's voice, tone, and delivery style carry political weight, likely containing promises or declarations.
2. **Background Sounds:** Crowd reactions and ambient sounds provide context and gauge public engagement.
3. **Music and Sound Effects:** These elements contribute emotional or dramatic layers to the visual narrative.

Signifiers:

1. **Minar-e-Pakistan:** Symbolizing national pride, it frames Sharif's speech within a historical context.
2. **Pigeons:** Calm birds, their interaction forms a critical visual moment.
3. **Crowd's Presence:** Indicates public interest and engagement.
4. **Facial Expressions and Gestures:** Offer cues about Sharif's emotional state and communication style.

Connotative Analysis

Table 1: *Connotative Analysis of Reel 1*

Signifier	Signified
Pigeons on Hands	Artificial peace narrative, staging in political imagery
Minar-e-Pakistan	Reclamation of political legacy, nationalistic appeal
Comments (e.g., "King is back")	Strong support and idealization of Nawaz Sharif
Sharif's Speech	Leadership, promise of stability and governance

The pigeons landing on Sharif's hands at Minar-e-Pakistan, a site integral to Pakistan's identity, metaphorically symbolize peace. This imagery suggests a narrative of tranquility and a peaceful era under Sharif's leadership. However, the orchestrated act introduces artificiality, questioning the authenticity of political imagery and narrative staging for public consumption. Minar Pakistan's choice enhances the event's significance, aligning Sharif's return with historical and nationalistic undertones, symbolizing a political legacy reclaim. Public responses like "King is back" and "Sher Aya Ha" reinforce Sharif's powerful, rightful leader image, emphasizing the deceptive nature of such political communications in digital campaigns listed in table 1. This staged act and location choice reveal calculated efforts to influence public perception, highlighting complexities in political narrative construction.

Reel No. 2: "#kam gawahi deta hy"

Reel No. 2, titled "#kam gawahi deta hy," uploaded on 25-11-2023 by PMLN Official (Figure 2), delves into the complex political narrative surrounding Nawaz Sharif's stance against his political adversaries, particularly Imran Khan. Garnering 29.6k views and 5,194 likes, this reel strikes a chord with its audience, as evidenced by the 135 comments praising Sharif as a hero and a true leader.

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements:

1. **Sharif's Presence:** Nawaz Sharif is portrayed with formality and authority, emanating earnest determination.
2. **Flashback Imagery:** Seamless integration of past footage shows Sharif engaging with farmers, emphasizing grassroots connection.
3. **Religious Activities:** Clips of Sharif participating in religious practices, donning traditional caps, align with cultural sentiments.
4. **Facial Expressions and Body Language:** Sharif's expressions and body language convey resilience and commitment.

Auditory Elements:

1. **Speech:** Sharif's assertive tone and words underline resilience, presenting a narrative of self-assured leadership.

2. **Background Score:** If present, the background score subtly reinforces Sharif's messages emotionally.
3. **Editing Techniques:** Strategic camera angles and transitions add dynamism, juxtaposing Sharif's narrative with historical actions.

Signifies:

1. **Cultural and Religious Symbolism:** Traditional caps during religious activities signify respect for cultural values.
2. **Grassroots Connection:** Flashback imagery symbolizes Sharif's hands-on approach, emphasizing connection with rural Pakistan.
3. **Strategic Location:** Formal and authoritative settings enhance the gravity of Sharif's presence, emphasizing political significance.
4. **Public Engagement:** Positive comments and high engagement metrics reflect the reel's resonance with a broad audience.



Figure 2: "Kaam gawahi deta he" by PMLN

Connotative Analysis

The connotative analysis of Reel No. 2, titled "#kam gawahi deta hy," (Table 2) delves into the underlying meanings, interpretations, and implications of the various elements presented in the reel. This analysis aims to uncover the deeper symbolic messages conveyed through Nawaz Sharif's speech, the visual imagery, and the audience's reactions. Nawaz Sharif's speech, forming the core of this reel, is not just a narrative of self-defense against political allegations but a powerful statement of his political legacy and vision for Pakistan. His assertive tone and choice of words convey a narrative of unyielding resilience

and self-assured leadership. He positions himself as a figure above the fray of common political skirmishes, suggesting that his work and achievements speak louder than any accusations leveled against him.

The flashback images of Sharif interacting with farmers and engaging in religious activities are potent connotative elements. They symbolize his deep connection with the cultural and agrarian roots of Pakistan, portraying him as a leader who is not only politically savvy but also attuned to the socio-religious pulse of the nation. This imagery serves to contrast Sharif's grounded and people-centric leadership style with the alleged corruption and negativity of his political rivals, particularly Imran Khan. The inclusion of religious and cultural symbolism, such as the wearing of traditional caps during religious activities, extends beyond mere cultural representation. It connotes respect for and alignment with Pakistan's rich religious traditions, positioning Sharif as a leader who embodies the cultural values of his people. This aspect of the reel appeals to the viewer's sense of cultural identity and religious sentiment, reinforcing Sharif's image as a leader who is integrally linked with the cultural fabric of Pakistan. The comments section of the reel provides insight into public perception and sentiment. Phrases like "Right Mian Sahib" "you are hero sir," and "a true leader Nawaz Sharif" not only demonstrate support for Sharif but also indicate the successful transmission of the intended narrative. These comments reflect the audience's perception of Sharif as a steadfast and reliable leader, further legitimizing his political narrative.

Table 2: *Connotative Analysis of Reel 2*

Signifier	Signified
Sharif's Assertive Speech	Leadership resilience, dismissal of rivals
Interactions with Farmers	Grounded, people-centric leadership
Participation in Religious Activities	Cultural and religious alignment, respect for traditions
Public Comments	Strong support, validation of Sharif's leadership
Flashback Images	Symbolizing Sharif's commitment to development

Reel No. 3: "Even Bollywood can't do that! #ankh macholi nhe chaly gi"

Reel No. 3, titled "Even Bollywood can't do that! #ankh macholi nhe chaly gi," is a politically charged TikTok reel that exemplifies the intersection of satire, media manipulation, and political rivalry in the digital age. Uploaded on the official PMLN page, this reel is a pointed attack on Imran Khan, a significant figure in Pakistani politics and the leader of the opposition party. With 20k views, 4,115 likes, and 337 comments, the reel has stirred a notable level of engagement and discourse among viewers, reflecting its impact and reach.

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements: The reel prominently features Imran Khan in a wheelchair, a departure from his usual dynamic portrayal, symbolizing vulnerability after a gunshot injury. The overlay of satirical commentary compares his situation to Bollywood, questioning the authenticity of his distress and ridiculing the seriousness of the scene.

Auditory Elements: The reel employs mocking laughter, strategically shaping viewer perception to cast doubt on the gravity of Khan's injury. This auditory cue serves as a deliberate tool, guiding the audience towards skepticism regarding the authenticity of Khan's portrayal.

Signifies: The juxtaposition of Khan's vulnerable image and the satirical commentary signifies an attempt to diminish the sincerity of his condition. The laughter sound effects add a layer of mockery, framing the reel within the realm of political satire.



Figure 3: Ankh macholi nhe chaly gi

Connotative Analysis

The reel's portrayal of Khan extends beyond visual depiction, delving into political rivalry and media manipulation. The symbolic interpretation suggests an exaggerated victimhood narrative, challenging the authenticity of Khan's presentation. The satirical commentary and laughter amplify a narrative of skepticism and ridicule, aiming to discredit Khan in the eyes of the public. Viewer engagement reflects a polarized response, highlighting the divisive nature of political discourse in Pakistan's digital landscape (Table 3).

Symbolic Interpretation of Imran Khan's Portrayal: Imran Khan, wheelchair-bound due to a gunshot injury, symbolizes vulnerability, yet connotatively, the reel implies an exaggerated victimhood narrative. Comparisons to Bollywood's dramatization suggest insincerity, theatricality, and a strategic ploy to garner sympathy or divert attention from political issues. This challenges the authenticity of Khan's condition, framing it as a calculated political maneuver rather than genuine adversity.

Satirical Commentary and Laughter: The overlay of satirical commentary and concluding laughter intensify the narrative of skepticism. These elements elevate the reel beyond a depiction of distress, transforming it into potent political satire. Laughter, a powerful tool, diminishes the gravity of Khan's situation, urging viewers to question the sincerity of his portrayal and embrace the narrative of disbelief.

Political Implications and Viewer Perception: The reel signifies the intense PMLN-Imran Khan political rivalry, utilizing satire to tarnish Khan's public image. By suggesting deceit and dramatization, the reel seeks to discredit him in the public eye. This mirrors broader strategies in digital political communication, manipulating imagery and narrative to shape public opinion.

Viewer engagement, reflected in comments, reveals a divided response. Some align with the mocking tone, while others find it inappropriate. This division underscores the polarized political discourse in Pakistan's digital sphere.

Table 3: *Connotative Analysis of Reel 3*

Signifier	Signified
Imran Khan in Wheelchair	Perceived exaggerated victimhood, political theatrics
Bollywood Comparison	Mockery, challenging authenticity of portrayal
Laughing Sound Effect	Undermining seriousness, inviting skepticism
Viewer Comments	Divided public perception, reflecting political polarization
PMLN's Upload	Strategic political rivalry, use of satire in campaigning

Reels from the Pakistan People's Party

Reel no 1: "NICVD Achievements - #ppp #Asifzardari #bilawalbhuto"

Reel No. 1, uploaded on the official PPP account (PPPOFFICIALPK), and titled "NICVD Achievements - #ppp #Asifzardari #bilawalbhuto," presents a narrative focused on the healthcare achievements under the administration of the Sindh government, particularly emphasizing the contributions of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) (figure 4). The reel, with 3,282 views, 257 likes, and 6 comments, reflects a modest level of engagement, indicating a specific audience interest in the topic.



Figure 4: "NICVD Achievements - #ppp #Asifzardari #bilawalbhuto"

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements: The reel strategically employs visuals of well-equipped NICVD centers across Sindh, portraying them as symbols of the PPP's commitment to healthcare. Images of patients humanize the narrative, emphasizing real-life impact. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's prominent presence visually aligns him with the party's healthcare initiatives, positioning him as a driving force.

Auditory Elements: Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's articulate narrative forms the core auditory component. His speech, with its tone and pitch, conveys commitment and achievement in public health. The potential inclusion of statistical data serves as auditory signifiers reinforcing the quantifiable success of NICVD.

Signifiers: The theme "Sab Ki Khidmat Sab Ka Pakistan" signifies inclusivity, emphasizing the PPP's commitment to comprehensive healthcare. The contested claim of Sindh's healthcare superiority serves as a signifier of political rivalry, framing the reel within a context of inter-provincial competition.

Connotative Analysis

Cultural & Social Norms: The visuals and themes align with cultural norms valuing healthcare, portraying the PPP as a caretaker. The reel strategically places Bilawal as a symbol of modern leadership, resonating with evolving societal expectations of progressive political figures.

Ideological Implications: The reel symbolically aligns NICVD with PPP's identity as a provider of essential services, projecting a narrative of benevolence. Bilawal's role implies a strategic ideological shift towards a dynamic and progressive vision, marking a generational change within the party.

Historical Background: The emphasis on Sindh's healthcare achievements, amid inter-provincial comparisons, reflects the historical backdrop of political rivalry. The reel's attempt to assert governance credentials addresses historical challenges and criticisms, presenting a narrative of successful PPP leadership (table 4).

Table 4: Connotative Analysis of Reel 1 (PPP)

Signifier	Signified
NICVD Centers and Healthcare Facilities	Symbolize PPP's commitment to public welfare and effective governance in healthcare.
Images of Beneficiaries	Represent the tangible impact of PPP's policies, humanizing their achievements.
Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's Speech	Positions Bilawal as a symbol of dynamic and progressive leadership within the PPP.
Theme "Sab Ki Khidmat Sab Ka Pakista"	Emphasizes inclusivity and comprehensive care, projecting the PPP as a unifying force.
Claims of Healthcare Leadership in Sindh	A narrative strategy to assert successful governance amid inter-provincial competition.

Reel No. 2 from PPP Officials: "Until Imran Khan Apologizes for Jannah House Fire"

Reel No. 2 from the PPP official account, titled "Until Imran Khan Apologizes for Jannah House Fire," delves into the charged political discourse between Bilawal Bhutto Zardari of the PPP and Imran Khan. With 7,925 views, 238 likes, and just 1 comment, the reel has garnered moderate attention, reflecting the interest in this particular political narrative (figure 5).



Figure 5: "Until Imran Khan Apologizes for Jannah House Fire"

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements: Reel No. 2 is set in Pakistan's Parliament House, creating a formal and serious atmosphere. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is positioned as the central figure, portrayed with a commanding and resolute demeanor. His expressions and body language emphasize the gravity of his statements, contributing to the overall seriousness of the political discourse.

Auditory Elements: Bilawal's speech forms the core auditory component. His strong and clear voice delivers a message combining the PPP's commitment to governance and a direct critique of Imran Khan. The tone and delivery highlight the critical nature of the issues discussed. Background sounds from the Parliament House, including reactions from assembly members, add authenticity to the setting.

Signifiers: The reel's central signifier is Bilawal's direct accusation regarding Imran Khan's alleged involvement in the Jannah House fire. This accusation becomes the focal point of the narrative, symbolizing the PPP's strategic critique of Khan and the attempt to control the political discourse by making this controversy a central theme.

Connotative Analysis

Cultural & Social Norms: Bilawal's emphasis on competent leadership and problem-solving aligns with cultural expectations of effective governance. The reel positions the PPP as a solution-oriented party, catering to diverse needs and reflecting modern aspirations for inclusive and efficient governance.

Ideological Implications: The reel symbolically engages in a direct critique of Imran Khan, utilizing the Jannah House fire controversy as a tool to discredit him. Bilawal's refusal to engage until Khan dissociates reflects a strategic move to polarize public opinion, focusing the political discourse on this specific issue and potentially deflecting attention from other challenges.

Historical Background: The focus on the Jannah House fire controversy highlights the historical rivalry between the PPP and Imran Khan's political faction. This rivalry becomes a central narrative, illustrating the complexities of Pakistan's political landscape. The reel strategically shapes the historical context, framing the PPP as a party willing to confront and challenge its political adversaries as listed in table 5.

Table 5: *Connotative Analysis of Reel 2 (PPP)*

Signifier	Signified
Bilawal's Address in Parliament	Symbolizes PPP's commitment to governance and public welfare
Critique of Imran Khan	A strategic move to discredit Khan and polarize public opinion
Theme of Problem-Solving	Represents the PPP's portrayal as a solution-oriented party
Lack of Concrete Evidence	Reflects the contentious nature of political narratives in Pakistan
Moderate Viewer Engagement	Indicates a divided public reception and the complexity of political discourse

Reel No. 3 from PPP Officials: "When Imran Khan had the opportunity to return the 190 million ₨"

Reel No. 3 from the PPP official account, titled "When Imran Khan had the opportunity to return the 190 million ₨," presents a politically charged narrative that delves into allegations of financial misconduct against Imran Khan (figure 6). The reel has garnered 1,445 views, 146 likes, and 3 comments, indicating targeted interest in this specific political issue.



Figure 6: "When Imran Khan had the opportunity to return the 190 million £"

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements: Filmed in a formal political environment, Reel No. 3 lends authority to Bilawal's address. His expressions and body language convey seriousness, emphasizing the gravity of allegations. The setting, possibly a government building, adds an official tone, heightening the perceived significance of the address.

Auditory Elements: Bilawal's speech is the core auditory element, marked by a strong and clear tone. Background sounds, subtly present, enhance the authenticity of the setting. Bilawal's direct accusations against Imran Khan are underscored by his urgent and conviction-filled delivery.

Signifiers: The formal setting, Bilawal's serious demeanor, and the specific accusation of £190 million misappropriation signify the gravity of the allegations. The reel strategically directs attention to these elements, framing the discourse around Imran Khan's alleged financial misconduct.

Connotative Analysis

Cultural & Social Norms: The accusations align with cultural expectations of political accountability and transparency. Bilawal symbolizes the PPP as a defender of people's rights, tapping into societal norms, valuing integrity in governance.

Ideological Implications: The reel strategically positions the PPP as a whistleblower against corruption, symbolizing a commitment to transparent governance. Bilawal's urgent tone implies a sense of responsibility, presenting the PPP as an ideological force fighting against alleged financial misconduct.

Historical Background: The singular focus on Khan and the intense political rivalry mirrors historical tensions between the PPP and Khan's party. This concentrated narrative is a deliberate strategy, utilizing historical context to intensify public attention on this specific controversy, potentially shaping the political discourse (table 6).

Table 6: *Connotative Analysis of Reel 3 (PPP)*

Signifier	Signified (Connotative Interpretation)
Bilawal’s Allegations Against Khan	symbolizes political rivalry and the PPP’s stance against corruption
Bilawal as Whistleblower	Represents an effort to position PPP as transparent and accountable
Impact on Younger Generation	Highlights the influence of political narratives on future perceptions
Focused Critique on Khan	Reflects the strategic use of media in political rivalry and agenda-setting

Reels from the Official Account of PTI’s Imran Khan

Reel No. 1 “Endorsement of a Political Figure”

Reel No. 1 (figure 7) from Imran Khan's official account, titled "One Has to Face Difficulties in the Path of Truth," illustrates the potent intersection of religion and politics in Pakistan. This reel has achieved significant engagement, with 4.9 million views, 1.4 million likes, and 29.6k comments, underscoring its widespread reach and impact.



Figure 7: Reel No. 1 “Endorsement of a Political Leader”

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements: The reel captures Imran Khan walking with a renowned religious scholar, visually symbolizing a union of political and religious leadership. The formal and dignified setting adds gravity to the endorsement, emphasizing the significance of religious approval in the political landscape.

Auditory Elements: Molana Tariq Jamil's speech, overlaid on the visual, compares Imran Khan to Quaid-e-Azam, attributing qualities like courage. This speech serves as a critical component, presenting Khan as a leader with historical significance and moral virtues. The auditory element contributes to the persuasive narrative.

Signifiers: The physical presence of Khan and the religious scholar symbolizes a powerful alliance. Molana Tariq Jamil's comparison to Quaid-e-Azam signifies Khan's elevated stature, framing him as a leader with qualities comparable to the founder of the nation. The religious endorsement serves as a signifier of moral and spiritual approval for Khan's leadership.

Connotative Analysis

Cultural & Social Norms: The visual and auditory elements align with cultural norms valuing the influence of religious figures. The endorsement symbolizes moral and spiritual approval, resonating with societal expectations that political leaders embody ethical values.

Ideological Implications: The imagery of Khan walking with the religious scholar symbolically aligns political and religious authority, suggesting a harmonious coexistence of moral values in governance. Molana Tariq Jamil's comparison elevates Khan to a historical and moral plane, contributing to a narrative that combines political acumen with ethical virtues.

Historical Background: The comparison to Quaid-e-Azam taps into historical significance, positioning Khan as a leader of exceptional courage and vision. This historical framing adds layers to the narrative, suggesting a continuation of the nation's founding values in Khan's leadership. The reel strategically leverages historical symbolism to reinforce the perceived importance of the endorsement.

In summary (table 7), Reel No. 1 strategically combines visual and auditory elements to present Imran Khan as a leader endorsed not only politically but also morally and spiritually. Religious symbolism and historical comparisons contribute to shaping a narrative that aligns with cultural norms and societal expectations. The success of the reel, as indicated by high engagement, suggests its effectiveness in resonating with the audience.

Table 7: *Connotative Analysis of Reel 1 (PTI)*

Signifier	Signified
Imran Khan and Religious Scholars Together	Union of religious righteousness and political leadership
Molana Tariq Jamil's Speech	Endorsement imbuing Khan's leadership with moral and historical significance
Comparison to Quaid-e-Azam	Elevates Khan's stature, aligning him with revered national leadership
Viewer Engagement	Reflects the effective resonance of religious endorsement in shaping public opinion
Impact on Younger Generation	Potential influence on shaping future perceptions of leadership and morality

Reel No. 2 "Dramatic Use of Editing & Speech"

Reel No. 2 from the PTI official account showcases a dramatic and emotive portrayal of Imran Khan, emphasizing his leadership qualities through a series of compelling visual and auditory elements (figure 8). The video, which has amassed 348.4k views, 90.3k likes, and 1,087 comments, effectively captures the public's admiration and support for Imran Khan, as evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive feedback.



Figure 8: Reel No. 2 “Dramatic Use of Editing & Speech”

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements: Reel No. 2 features a dynamic compilation of visuals, including scenes of Imran Khan addressing large crowds and a pivotal moment during a U.S. media interview. Contrasts are drawn with Nawaz Sharif, depicted in a less assertive light. The reel concludes with a symbolic image of Khan alongside a lion, reinforcing his leadership attributes.

Auditory Elements: Muhammad Ali Khan delivers a powerful speech expressing unwavering support for Imran Khan, highlighting his prioritization of national sovereignty. The dramatic editing and music heighten the emotional impact, making the narrative more engaging and persuasive.

Signifiers: Key signifiers include scenes of Khan addressing large crowds, his "absolutely not" moment in a U.S. interview, and the symbolic image of Khan alongside a lion. These visuals signify Khan's popularity, assertiveness on international issues, and leadership qualities associated with strength and courage.

Connotative Analysis

Cultural & Social Norms: Muhammad Ali Khan's speech symbolizes the PTI's dedication to national interests and sovereignty, tapping into cultural norms of pride and independence. The symbolic representation of Khan with a lion aligns with cultural symbols of strength and majesty, resonating with societal values.

Ideological Implications: The reel strategically contrasts Khan's leadership with Nawaz Sharif, emphasizing Khan's assertiveness and strength on the international stage. The portrayal of Khan as a defender of national sovereignty aligns with PTI's ideological stance, positioning Khan as a leader who prioritizes the nation's interests.

Historical Background: The "absolutely not" moment is strategically included to symbolize Khan's assertiveness, echoing his historical stance on key issues. The symbolic representation of Khan with a lion taps into historical associations of leadership strength, creating a narrative that aligns with cultural perceptions of powerful leadership.

In summary, Reel No. 2 (Table 8) leverages visual and auditory elements, along with strategic signifiers, to convey a narrative of Imran Khan as a strong and decisive leader, contrasting his leadership style with others. The reel strategically aligns with cultural norms, PTI's ideological stance, and historical associations to reinforce Khan's image as a leader with attributes of strength and resilience.

Table 8: *Connotative Analysis of Reel 2 (PTI)*

Signifier	Signified (Connotative Interpretation)
Muhammad Ali Khan's Speech	Symbolizes PTI's dedication to national sovereignty and independence
Contrasting Visuals of Khan and Sharif	Reinforces Khan's image as a stronger leader compared to political rivals
Khan's 'Absolutely Not' Statement	Represents defiance, assertiveness, and national pride
Imagery of Lion with Khan	Connotes strength, courage, and leadership qualities
Audience Engagement	Reflects the effectiveness of charismatic leadership in shaping public opinion

3rd Reel from Imran Khan's Official Account: "Use of Religion in Politics"

The reel (figure 9) from Imran Khan's official account, focusing on the "Use of Religion in Politics," is a potent example of intertwining religious ideology with political narrative. Garnering 472.9k views, 163.9k likes, and 8,804 comments, the video has struck a chord with a large audience, reflecting its impactful message and presentation.



Figure 9: "Use of Religion in Politics"

Denotative Analysis

Visual Elements: The reel utilizes visual storytelling with a prominent focus on Imran Khan, incorporating scenes of prayer, moments of struggle, and his international presence. Contrasts are drawn with other political figures, emphasizing Khan's resilience. The visual symbol of Khan juxtaposed with a lion serves as a powerful representation of strength.

Auditory Elements: Imran Khan's forceful and emotive speech is central to the reel, emphasizing his commitment to principles rooted in religious conviction. The background audio from a podcast interview adds depth to the narrative, reinforcing themes of struggle and resilience.

Signifiers: Key signifiers include scenes of Khan praying, his arrest, the United Nations speech, and the symbolic representation with a lion. These visuals signify Khan's spiritual devotion, political struggles, global presence, and qualities associated with strength and courage.

Connotative Analysis

Cultural & Social Norms: The use of religious rhetoric aligns with cultural norms in Pakistan, where religious sentiments are deeply embedded in national identity. The visual portrayal of Khan praying resonates with societal values, showcasing a leader who integrates spirituality into his public life.

Ideological Implications: Imran Khan's alignment of political ideology with the Islamic principle 'La Ilaha Illallah' symbolizes resistance and commitment to national sovereignty. This ideological stance positions Khan as a leader of moral fortitude and resilience, appealing to the audience's values and beliefs.

Historical Background: The reel strategically includes moments of struggle, such as Khan's arrest, symbolizing sacrifices for the nation. These historical references contribute to the narrative of Khan as a leader committed to his cause. The symbolic representation of a lion echoes historical associations of leadership strength.

In summary, Reel, "Use of Religion in Politics" employs visual and auditory elements, along with strategic signifiers, to construct a narrative aligning political ideology with spiritual values. The reel leverages cultural norms, ideological stances, and historical references to portray Khan as a leader embodying both moral and political strength (table 9).

Table 9: Connotative Analysis of Reel 3 (PTI)

Signifier	Signified (Connotative Interpretation)
Khan's Use of 'La Ilaha Illallah	Symbolizes resistance, integrity, and national sovereignty
Scenes of Prayer and UN Speech	Balance of spiritual devotion and worldly responsibilities
Contrasting Portrayals	Elevates Khan's leadership compared to political rivals
Public Engagement	Reflects strong resonance with Khan's leadership style

Fairclough Discourse Analysis

Table10 (a): PML-N Reels Analysis

Reels	Discourse Analysis	Strategic Element
"Bohtan-kashi ki ha, Who Kaun Log thy."	Implies a dismissal of allegations as baseless. The use of "Who Kaun Log thay" questions the credibility of accusers, portraying them as unidentifiable or unimportant.	Shaping a narrative of false accusations and discrediting accusers.
"Keh In mein se Negative kaun log	Directly challenges the credibility of those making negative claims.	Shaping a narrative that deflects from negativity, emphasizing a

thay."	Implies a selective focus on positive aspects.	positive perspective.
"Jab Hamary Kam Ko Log Dekhain Ge"	Indicates anticipation of public attention toward their work. Suggests a belief that positive actions will speak for themselves.	Fostering anticipation and expectation around their performance.
"InshaAllah saari tawajjuh hamari."	Invokes a sense of divine assurance. Positions the party as deserving of undivided attention.	Seeking a positive association through religious reference.
"Kisaanon ki UPLIFT mein hogi."	Promises improvement in farmers' conditions, aligning with popular sentiments.	Appeals to a specific demographic (farmers) and projects a commitment to their well-being.

Table 10 (b): *PPP Reels Analysis*

Reels	Discourse Analysis	Strategic Element
"NICD Chest Pain Unit hai."	Highlights a specific healthcare initiative. Emphasizes a concrete service provided by the government.	Shaping a narrative around healthcare achievements.
"Sehat ki saholiyat ki farahmi mein."	Points towards efforts in delivering healthcare services. Stresses the importance of health facilities provision.	Positioning the party as a provider of health facilities.
"Aur paisay na hone ki wajah se."	Introduces an economic challenge in healthcare provision. Implies overcoming financial barriers.	Connecting healthcare challenges to economic issues, potentially leveraging empathy.
"Subah Bhar 24 mein Chest Pain Units."	Highlights accessibility, indicating the round-the-clock availability of health services.	Reinforcing the party's commitment to healthcare accessibility.
"Mustafeed ho chuke hain jo ek tareekhi hasiyat rakhta hai."	Positions recipients as part of history, creating a sense of significance.	Associating positive outcomes with the party's governance.
"NICVD hospital muntaqil kiya jata hai."	Stresses the movement of patients to a specialized hospital, portraying organized healthcare practices.	Emphasizing advanced healthcare services and specialized treatment.
"Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan ya mulk ke kisi bhi kone se ho."	Claims inclusivity in healthcare provision, projecting a nationwide impact.	Broadening the narrative to a national scale.
"Bath room istemaal kiya ya nahi."	Raises a seemingly trivial matter, potentially critiquing a focus on non-essential issues.	Shaping a narrative around prioritizing significant concerns over trivialities.
: "Kya woh siyasatdan banna chahte hain ya siyasi jamat rehna chahte hain."	Poses a question about political aspirations, hinting at the party's willingness to embrace diverse roles.	Creating an open-ended engagement with potential members or supporters.

"Ke hum awam ke masail hal karein."	Articulates a commitment to solving public issues, positioning the party as a problem-solving entity.	Aligning with public expectations and aspirations.
"Jo mulawwis thay unko anjam ka samna karna pare ga."	Foretells consequences for wrongdoers, implying a stance against corruption or malpractice.	Reinforcing a commitment to accountability and justice.
"KI maffi nahi mangte"	Asserts an unapologetic stance, potentially signaling strength or a refusal to compromise.	Crafting an image of resoluteness and integrity.

Table 10 (c): *PTI's Imran Khan Reels Analysis*

Reels	Discourse Analysis	Strategic Element
"Ehtesab ki badi baat karne wala Wazir-e-Azam tha."	Presents Imran Khan as a leader focused on accountability, emphasizing his role as a former Prime Minister.	Shaping a narrative around the leader's commitment to accountability.
"Sindh ki awam ka paisa hai, ye unko diya jaye."	Asserts ownership of funds for Sindh's public welfare. Implies a duty to allocate funds appropriately.	Aligning with regional sentiments and projecting a commitment to responsible fund use.
"Usne 190 million pound Pakistan ka paisa hai."	Accuses Imran Khan of mishandling a significant amount of money, alleging financial misconduct.	Employing an accusatory tone to damage the leader's credibility.
"Bartania Hukumat ne Pakistan main bhejna chaaha."	Claims that the UK government intended to send funds to Pakistan, implying a missed opportunity.	Suggesting negligence or intentional mishandling of financial opportunities.
"Kabina ka woh paisa Malik Riaz Sahib ko diya."	Points to the diversion of funds to a specific individual, adding specificity to the accusations.	Adding detail to the narrative to enhance credibility.
"Usne apni kabina ko dhoka diya."	Accuses Imran Khan of deceiving his own cabinet, implying a breach of trust or dishonesty.	Questioning the leader's integrity and creating doubt about internal governance.

Moreover, the discourse in PML-N and PPP reels involves a strategic blend of positive narrative construction, accusations against opponents, and promises of addressing public concerns. In contrast, PTI's reels face accusatory tones regarding financial mismanagement. The common thread lies in shaping perceptions, whether through projecting positive achievements, alleging wrongdoings, or asserting strong leadership qualities. Each party strategically crafts narratives tailored to influence the audience and reinforce its political stance.

Interview Responses

Table 11: *Comprehensive analysis of interview responses (N=50)*

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent (%)
TikTok Usage	Does Not Use TikTok	10	20.00%
	Occasional User	20	40.00%
	Regular User	20	40.00%
Political Content Awareness	Unaware of Political Content	20	40.00%
	Aware of Political Content	30	60.00%
Reaction to Political Reels	Neutral or No Reaction	15	30.00%
	Disinterest or Skepticism	35	70.00%
Visual Influence	No Influence or Not Specified	25	50.00%
	Notices Visuals	25	50.00%
Message Comprehension	Varied Comprehension		
Content Credibility	Non-Credible View	30	60.00%
	Skepticism or No Comment	20	40.00%
Impact Comparison	Varied Impact Comparisons		
Emotional Connection	Rare or No Emotional Connection	40	80.00%
	Occasional Emotional Impact	10	20.00%
Content Engagement	No Engagement	35	70.00%
	Occasional Engagement	15	30.00%
Influence on Political Views	Little to No Influence	45	90.00%
	Slight Influence	5	10.00%
Leaders' Perception	Varied Perceptions		
Discussion with Peers	Rare or No Discussion	30	60.00%
	Occasional Discussion	20	40.00%
Youth Representation	Varied Views on Representation		
Improvement Suggestions	Diverse Suggestions		

Conclusion

The semiotic analysis reveals the intricate use of symbols and imagery by Pakistani political parties in TikTok reels to construct compelling narratives and convey ideological messages (Q1). For instance, symbols like pigeons landing on Sharif's hands at Minar Pakistan in PML-N reels metaphorically signify peace and leadership legacy, strategically shaping perceptions of the party's values and achievements (Q1). Similarly, the portrayal of Imran Khan in PTI reels, often with religious symbolism and historical references, aims to bolster his image as a morally upright and capable leader, aligning with societal norms and expectations (Q1). These semiotic elements play a crucial role in capturing the audience's attention, eliciting emotional responses, and influencing perceptions of political figures and parties (Q1).

Furthermore, the discourse analysis sheds light on the strategic elements employed by political parties to shape public perception and reinforce their political stances. For example, the PTI reels strategically utilize accusatory tones regarding financial mismanagement, aiming to damage the credibility of opponents like Imran Khan (Q2). Conversely, phrases in PPP reels such as "NICD Chest Pain Unit hai" highlight specific healthcare initiatives, projecting the party as a provider of essential services and aligning with societal expectations (Q2). These strategic elements are carefully crafted to resonate with the audience's values and beliefs, thereby fostering engagement and influencing perceptions.

Moreover, the discourse analysis underscores the varied impact of TikTok reels on audience engagement and political views. While some viewers exhibit disinterest or skepticism towards political content, others engage with specific narratives and express skepticism or support for political figures. This variability in audience reactions highlights the complexity of digital political communication and the diverse ways in which individuals perceive and engage with political content on social media platforms like TikTok (Q3). Additionally, interview responses indicate an adequate influence of TikTok reels on political views, suggesting that while the platform serves as a medium for political communication, its impact on shaping public opinion may be passable (Q3).

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