



PROJECTION OF INTERPERSONAL PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE POLITICAL LEADERS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MEMES: A POLITICAL DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This research study attempts to investigate the interpersonal portrayal of female political leaders in Pakistani political memes. Political meme refers to an image or video, humorous in nature, carrying a hidden political agenda or message and adding a layer of political commentary with the help of text on top or bottom, editing and context. The objectives of this study are to examine the visual and linguistic strategies used in political memes in order to analyze how these multimodal resources construct the interpersonal portrayal of female political leaders, and also to explore the sociocultural and ideological meanings embedded in these representations. This research employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) to scrutinize the representation of female political leaders in data set of 175 political memes. Further, this study also employs Royce (2006) Intersemiotic Complementarity as a supporting tool to analyse and validate the text-image relationship. The data comprises of 175 political memes of female leaders from three prominent political parties i.e. PTI, PMLN, PPP, collected via different social media platforms, i.e., facebook, instagram, X (formerly twitter) etc. Out of these memes, 10 memes are selected for in depth analysis. The analysis identifies recurring representational patterns in which gendered and personalized framings emerge through the interaction of visual and linguistic elements in political memes. With the examination of political memes as multimodal texts, this study contributes to political discourse and gender studies by illuminating how digital visual-verbal practices shape gendered political meanings and underscores the significance of meme culture in contemporary political communication.

Keywords: *Political Memes, Female Political Leaders, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Intersemiotic Complementarity.*

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1. Introduction

Social media plays a vital role in today's world. Social media platforms now serve as crucial forums for political discourse, identity negotiation and political engagement, in this rapidly evolving world of digital communication. According to Shifman(2014) "Internet memes have become increasingly prevalent and influential mode of communication, particularly in digital activism and political commentary, among various forms of online expression". Milner (2016) carried the same point and posed an idea that the meticulous combination of visual and textual elements in memes and their ability to disseminate rapidly allows memes to serve not only as vehicles for satire and humour but also as powerful instruments for shaping public opinions and opposing dominant ideologies.

Political memes are not ideologically neutral as they unveil, influence and disseminate particular ideologies, worldviews, social values and hidden abstract meanings. These memes often mock women by slamming their character, appearance and classifying them as being too emotional and incompetent instead of focusing on self-determination, talent and leadership. In dominant patriarchal countries like Pakistan, this trend is specifically prominent where men hold prominent leadership positions and women still lack behind and face double scrutiny for both their public portrayals and compliance with societal gendered expectations. Political charged memes in Pakistan often ridicule female political leaders such as Maryam Nawaz (PML-N), Sherry Rehman (PPP), and Zartaj Gul (PTI) and other female contenders questioning their leadership, mocking their appearance, emotional expressions and competence, propagating several stereotypes.

The present study integrates Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) which provides an elaborative theoretical and methodological framework in order to examine the use and role of semiotic modes to construct abstract meanings (Jewitt, 2014). Alongwith this MDA framework, the study also employs intersemiotic complementarity by Royce (2006) as complementary and supporting tool to increase the richness and authenticity of the memes analyses as it helps to investigate and validate the image-text link in disseminating particular ideologies.

The evolution of memes from simple internet jokes to powerful communicative tools influencing public perceptions and disseminating ideologies, is quite alarming.

Dittmar (2015) presents the notion that the analysis of memes offers critical insight in either reinforcing popular discourse or challenging prevailing beliefs in socio-political environment like Pakistan, where gender expectations often undermine women's political agency. In this study, the analysis of the visual and textual patterns of memes helps in contributing to a broader understanding of digital artifacts in reflecting and influencing socio-political ideologies and gender norms in contemporary Pakistan.

The study is relevant due to three major intersections: (1) the growing significance of memes in political communication; (2) the ongoing stereotyping of female leaders based on gender and (3) the need of well-suited MDA model to unveil stereotypes and hidden ideologies embedded in digital texts.

The present study attempts to highlight the necessity for counter-discursive strategies, educational interventions, and ethical digital practices by pointing out various ways following which memes belittle, ridicule or delegitimize women in politics. It makes a regional and theoretical contribution to the literature on memes, gender and political discourse by focusing on analysing the portrayals of female politicians from major political parties such as PTI, PML-N, and PPP. This study also coins a new term "Memecracy" that refers to a political culture in which rapid dissemination of memes gradually shapes political identities, influence public opinions, reinforce several stereotypes and ideologies, challenge power structures and mobilize digital activism.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What linguistic choices and visual patterns do the meme creator employ to identify women leaders in Pakistan through their projections on social media?
2. How are female political leaders represented in political memes circulating on social media in Pakistan?
3. What socio-cultural and socio-political ideologies do the meme creator construct through their representations?

2.Literature Review

The term "meme" was first used by Dawkins (1976) to describe how culture changed, but it has now extended far beyond its biological metaphor to become a key idea in comprehending digital communication in the internet era. Memes have become an essential element of online discourse with the rise of participatory culture and social media. Shifman (2013a) revised the concept of memes for the digital age and defined internet memes as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form,

and/or stance, which are created with awareness of each other and are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users.”

According to Miltner (2018), memes are densely layered with cultural and ideological significance despite their apparent insignificance. Using the phrase "weapons of the weak," which she borrowed from Chinese film scholar Cui Weiping (2009), who recognized memes as a means for marginalized people to express resistance in mediatized society, she claims that memes are more than just jokes. This approach is consistent with the notion that, particularly in politically constrictive settings, memes serve as vehicles for dissent and critique. This notion is supported by Phillips and Milner (2017), who claim that even humorous memes are political since they convey views on gender, race, class, and power.

Political memes, with the integration of humour, satire and irony, make their political stance. According to Soh (2020), humour in political memes can be used as a tool for digital protest as in this way it allows hidden criticism and helps users to bypass strict censorship laws. This stance proves to be consistent with a more comprehensive view of online humor serving as a tool for both criticism and community building (Gerbaudo, 2015).

Memes exposure reinforces or promotes in-group solidarity and out-group hostility as they target opposing political candidates which fosters negative emotions or sentiments.(Halverson & Weeks ,2023). They serve as powerful instruments in political campaigns as they have the ability to quickly influence public opinion and can be used to build narratives often without clear attribution of source (Galipeau, 2022). Paz et al. (2021) highlighted the growing concern regarding the use of memes in harmful ways such as to disseminate hate speech or false information, that might intensify political polarization into overt hostility, particularly in politically charged settings (Ashfaq-Qazi et al., 2022; Mehboob & Alvi, 2021; Siddiqua, 2021).

In addition to reflecting popular opinion, memes also shape it. The focus of public discourse is significantly shaped by the framing power of memes. Keeping in view the Agenda-Setting Theory by Cohen (1963), it can be asserted that memes do not particularly dictate specific opinions rather they guide public towards it. According to Suleman and Saleem's (2024) examination of Facebook memes in Pakistan, memes have the ability to shape narrative frames around political figures. According to Saleem et al. (2022) humour and satire were commonly used in memes to expose the hypocrisy and other perceived flaws of the political leaders through their examination of political memes used during Pakistan's "No-Confidence Motion 2022. Their findings further suggested that memes serve as ideological tools with the ability to frame political discourse in biased ways by

reinforcing stereotypes through the complex yet impactful combination of visual and textual cues.

MDA also reveals that a meme does not function merely as source of entertainment rather it hides deep ideological beliefs inside it. Drakett et al. (2018) argue that though humour in multimodal texts apparently seems to be neutral or harmless but it often draws on cultural incongruity, exaggeration, parody which in turn helps to reinforce dominant norms.

The primary ideological function of political memes is to undermine the legitimacy of female figures. Ross and Rivers (2017) put across the viewpoint that memes can be used to challenge political power by mocking and targeting the appearance as well as authority of female leaders and in this way memes shape public perception. This is further supported by Hakoköngäs & Halmesvaara (2025), who highlight how visual rhetoric is used by extremist online memes to frame political personalities inside negative ideological narratives in order to persuade and diminish positive opinions of them.

Political memes can be viewed as tools of cultural hegemony through Gramscian lens as they circulate dominant ideologies and worldviews by using humour and relativity factor and present them as common sense. In the same way, Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) also helps in understanding the functioning of memes. Different social media platforms can serve as ISAs as they disseminate social and political norms. Memes can thus operate as both products and vehicles of ideology within this context. Eagleton's perspective in addition states that ideology holds the power both to distort reality and legitimise existing power relations. Memes thus possess this duality as they can mask structural inequalities through the use of humour and can also expose or reveal those inequalities by using satire and parody.

Culture jamming is the prominent tactic or key ideological strategy that is found in political memes. According to McKelvey et al. (2023), during election cycles the focus of partisan meme-making is less on persuasion and more on reinforcing shared beliefs and also on strengthening group identity.

The "double bind" of gender politics is often reflected in political memes directed at female leaders: women need to be capable without coming across as "cold," and sympathetic without coming across as "weak." According to Spencer (2017) male politicians in memes are often judged on their leadership or policies in comparison to female candidates who are disproportionately criticised over their looks, personalities, emotional traits and feelings. These findings corroborate with Sportelli and D'Errico (2025) who found out how false information about female politicians often reflects implicit gender biases and thus can distort voter perception.

Lomotey (2020) points out that humour in political memes often serves as a cover for underlying sexist ideologies. As evidence of the serious societal repercussions of such humor, Coffé et al. (2025) highlight how sexist remarks, preconceptions, and rejections are actively harming the careers of female candidates, stifling their voices, and deterring future leaders.

Memos have now emerged as politically influential, dynamic and vibrant form of online expression in Pakistan. According to Qazi et al. (2022), memes were crucial in creating narrative frames surrounding politicians by analysing the visual and linguistic elements of political memes that were shared on Facebook. Siddiqua's (2021) also found out parallel patterns in her research on hate speech on the internet during the 2018 general election and highlighted that political memes often target female leaders by using harsh metaphors, inappropriate language and fabricated narratives. Shahid et al. (2021) concluded through their findings that Pakistani women in memes are portrayed with patriarchal ideologies by reducing female politicians to conventional gender roles. According to Khan (2024), memes in Pakistan contribute to affective polarization. During her analysis of meme pages that supported various political parties, she revealed that memes depicting women leaders are employed with gender stereotypes and they are characterized as aggressive, disrespectful, or unfit for leadership roles. Raza et al. (2025) through their investigation about how political memes on Facebook affect public opinion in Pakistan, identifies that meme culture in Pakistan is a site of ideological negotiation where humour and satire shape public narratives.

Although much research is being conducted on political memes but the exploration of the Pakistani context through the lens of Multimodal Discourse Analysis still remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining the textual and visual representations of female leaders in Pakistani political memes. The literature review demonstrates that memes that were once considered as trivial digital artifacts have now transformed into powerful and influential tools of political communication.

3. Theoretical Framework

The focus of this study is to explore the construction and dissemination of gendered political identities by these digital artifacts by analysing the interpersonal portrayal of Pakistani female political leaders through memes on different social media platforms. A strong theoretical framework is necessary to analyse the complex interplay between linguistic and visual cues in memes in the given and unique socio-cultural and political context of Pakistan, where there is an intersection of gender norms and political rivalries.

In order to achieve this goal, the present study employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) as a theoretical framework but in addition it also integrates Royce (2006) concept of intersemiotic complementarity as a supporting tool for better and in-depth examination of political memes. With the integration of multiple semiotic modes like images, text, color, layout, and spatial arrangement into a unified analytical framework, MDA goes beyond traditional discourse analysis.

3.1.Theory of Visual Grammar

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose a theory of grammar of visual design that comprises of three metafunctions corresponding to Halliday's metafunctions of language.

Representational Metafunction: This metafunction focuses on what is being depicted and how the image describes people, objects, places, events that are portrayed in it. It involves two types of processes: Narrative and Conceptual processes.

Interactive Metafunction: This metafunction explores the relationship between represented participants and the viewer by examining gaze, social distance and camera angles and how images engage audiences and position them socially and emotionally. Key components include: Gaze, Social Distance, Angle and Perspective.

Compositional Metafunction: This metafunction explores the structure of visual elements and examines their arrangement to analyse the conveyed and hidden meaning. It includes: Information Value, Salience, Framing.

Researchers like Qazi et al. (2022) and Khan (2024) shed light on the role of MDA in strategic construction of gender, power and satire disguised as humour in political memes. Such research support the prominent role of Visual Grammar in this study in providing valuable insights to how the semiotic sources like gaze, distance, angles, salience and framing reinforce gendered political ideologies, within Pakistani context. These works authenticate the use of Visual Gramamr as valuable framework to analyse political memes and affirm its utility in analysing gendered political portrayals in online discourse.

The present study introduces the concept of "Memecracy" that refers to a political culture in which memes have a major influence on public opinion, electoral narratives, and ideological conflicts. The fundamental characteristics of memecracy include:

- Ideological encoding
- Affective Engagement

- Digital activism
- Amplification of Stereotypes
- Humour based Mobilization
- Multimodal Influence

MDA is a critical approach essential for analyzing the functioning of memes within Memecracy, especially regarding gendered political discourse.

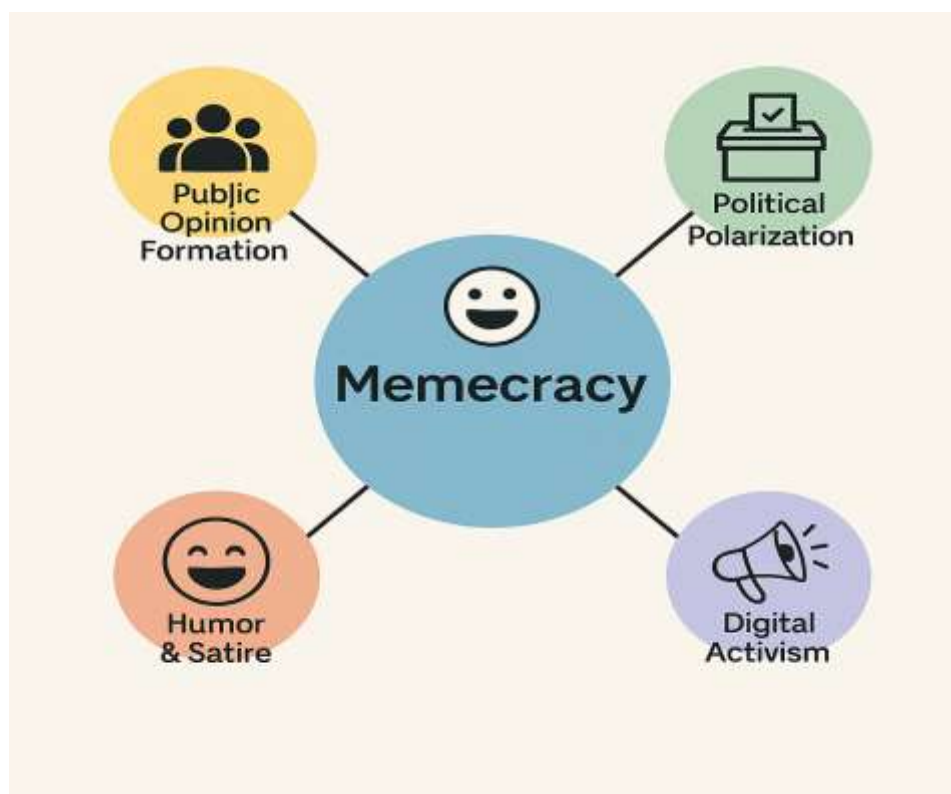


Figure 1: Memecracy Mindmap

3.2. Intersemiotic Complimentarity

Royce (2006) gave the concept of intersemiotic complementarity and he highlighted the complex interaction between visual and linguistic modes in meaning-making. Although this study primarily employs Kress and van Leeuwen's MDA analysis as a framework but it also integrates the concept of intersemiotic complementarity for a nuanced and in-depth examination of political memes. This study employs intersemiotic complementarity as a supporting tool to help validate the meaning-making process in political memes, analysing the interaction between text and image in detail and to explore

how this interaction between modes reinforces, contradicts, extends and complements each other within a multimodal text. Xie (2022) further validates the role of intersemiotic complementarity in exploring the construction of integrated meaning in case study of promotional film and reveals the collective effect of verbal text and visuals in constructing integrated meanings. Thus, this Royce's framework will help to strengthen the interpretive depth of this study and will help to comprehend the interplay between modes that co-construct several political meanings and gendered portrayals. Moreover, it will also help to examine in detail how stereotypes and implicit ideologies are visually and verbally encoded within political memes.

3.3.Critical Feminist Orientation

The study adopts a critical feminist research stance in alignment with the qualitative paradigm. The critical feminist orientation is employed as an interpretive lens to examine how gendered power relations and ideological asymmetries are embedded within the interpersonal and compositional choices of political memes. This feminist lens informs the analytical reading of visual and linguistic resources identified through MDA and thus helps to uncover the construction, normalization and perpetuation of gender stereotypes via memes, such as infantilization, hypersexualization, and emotional trivialization. It also helps to analyze the impact these portrayals leave on the socio-political legitimacy of female leaders. This critical approach towards political memes places the study in the context of bigger campaigns for political representation and gender equality.

3.4.Materials and Methods

The present study follows a qualitative research paradigm, which emphasizes the use of rich and detailed data in order to understand social phenomena in their natural contexts. For the purpose of political memes selection, the study employs a purposive non-probability sampling technique for analysis. Following the qualitative research design, this sampling strategy proves to be appropriate for qualitative analysis allowing the selection of memes that are most relevant to the research questions and resulting in rich analytical insights. The sampling is designed in a way ensuring representation of female political leaders from Pakistan's three major political parties: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Memes are collected from different social media platforms with open access including Facebook, instagram, X(formerly Twitter).

Initial dataset: After all the selection process, a comprehensive corpus of 175 memes was selected for analysing the interpersonal portrayal of Pakistani female leaders in Pakistani political memes.

In-depth analysis: Out of this comprehensive corpus, 5 memes were selected for detailed multimodal discourse analysis based on their prominent themes, ideological complexity, multimodal richness, and relevance to research questions and objectives.

Data collection process involves searching of memes manually, taking screenshots, and saving memes over the span of two-months. Each meme that is being selected has some political context (e.g., election campaign, parliamentary event, protest) included in its metadata. In order to facilitate systematic analysis, memes were classified on the basis of prominent themes :

Table 1. Classification of Themes

Classification on the basis of Themes	No. of memes (N=175)
Moral Vilification	90
Appearance Ridiculation and Objectification	48
Intellectual Undermining	18
Corruption and Power Greed	12
Trivialization of Leadership Role	7

4. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter deals with analysing the selected 10 memes in order to examine the interpersonal portrayal of female leaders in political memes and further interprets the findings to reveal the broader ideological and gendered portrayal of female leaders and explores how linguistic and visual cues co-construct meanings.

4.1. Analysis of Female Portrayal in Pakistani Political Memes

4.1.1. Meme 1 Analysis

Figure 2: Maryum Nawaz as Fraud



Translated (There is a difference between Jolie and Fake).

The meme juxtaposes two images with the caption on the top “There is a difference between Jolie and Fake”. The pic on the right is of Angelina Jolie sitting with a poor lady listening to her with full attention. The context of the pic is that Angelina Jolie provided aid to flood affected victims. Whereas the pic on left side is of Maryam Nawaz holding a poor lady who is crying by leaning her head on Maryam’s shoulder. Thus by juxtaposing global celebrity activism with local political leadership, the meme invites viewers to evaluate the authenticity of humanitarian engagement.

At the representational level, the meme positions women as central participants within a humanitarian crisis by foregrounding female political and humanitarian figures alongside flood victims. A narrative action process is established through hand placement of Maryum Nawaz on the victim’s shoulder which constructs an act of comfort. This gesture of Maryum is undermined by her diverted gaze which is directed away from the victim. This visual disjunction points towards emotional detachment and frames the act as performative rather than empathetic which further reinforces the impression of staged compassion intended for public consumption.

On the other hand, Angelina Jolie seems to be in a reactional process. Her direct gaze towards the flood victim positions her as an attentive listener which emphasizes emotional engagement and sincerity. A gentle frown can be seen on Angelina’s face depicting her concern, empathy and care in such situation in comparison to Maryum’s subtle, almost indifferent facial expression revealing her emotional detachment in an intense situation. This constructs a binary between performative political sympathy and perceived genuine humanitarian care.

This symbolic contrast becomes central to the meme’s meaning-making and depicts the difference between genuine care and performative empathy which is verified by the caption that frames Maryam’s empathy as “fake” in opposition to Jolie’s “real” concern.

At interactive level, both Maryum and Angelina Jolie do not look directly at the viewer which creates an “offer” image. This invites observation and judgment at viewer’s end rather than interaction. The medium close-up framing reduces social distance and encourages emotional proximity with the represented participants. Camera angles further reinforce ideological positioning. Maryam Nawaz is captured from a slightly oblique horizontal angle, subtly distancing her from the viewer and diminishing emotional alignment While Angelina is shown at frontal angle and in closer proximity, visually inviting the viewer into the scene reinforcing emotional engagement. Both images are

taken at eye level vertical angle which ensures equal power relations and offers observation from the viewer without the sense of superiority and inferiority.

At compositional level, information value plays a significant role. Maryum's image is placed on the left side that indicates given information which portrays her as a familiar political figure. While Jolie's image is placed on the right side that shows new information thus directing the viewer's attention towards her as a comparative benchmark. The caption on the top functions as ideal information that frames interpretation while the images below offer the real to be re-evaluated through the lens of linguistic irony. Both central figures occupy the center of their respective frames while flood victims are positioned at the margins as supporting cues that add emotional quotient and contextualize the image.

Saliency is achieved through visual contrast. Jolie's minimal makeup and raw image texture reinforce her genuine connect and emotional transparency. In comparison to this, Maryum's face is shown as styled, visually polished and brightly lit-up that creates a conflict with the gravity of the situation, emphasizing performance over authenticity. The common black colour of headscarves also add emotional value and seriousness towards the situation. Framing is reinforced through a vertical line that clearly splits both the images, reinforcing binary opposition created by the text and allowing the viewer to interpret the meme by contrasting both figures and their actions.

Inter-semiotic level authenticates multimodal interpretation by exploring the relationship between the text and image and revealing underlying ideologies. At first both the images might evoke feelings of empathy and care, but the text anchors abstract meaning through the use of linguistic cues creating an ideological stance-questioning performance vs authenticity. The pairing of text and the image creates ironic intertextual commentary using humanitarian narratives to nullify local leaderships.

4.1.2. Meme 2 Analysis



Figure 2: Mocking of Zartaj Gul's Intellect

Translated (The person who removes dents from cars is called dentist).

The context of the meme is that Zartaj Gul during an interview passed a statement regarding Covid19 that Covid19 is called Covid19 because it has 19 points. This utterance is recontextualized through the caption: “The person who removes dents from cars is called dentist”. The caption operates as an ironic analogy and constructs humour by questioning the competence of a female political leader.

From representational perspective, the meme portrays the image of Zartaj Gul-Pakistani female political leader of PTI party sitting in a formal setting, most probably a parliamentary session. She is dressed in culturally symbolic attire including a green dupatta and white shawl, reinforcing her political and national identity. Zartaj Gul performs a narrative action process as her hands are in crisscross position resting on the table and creating a vectors. This posture conventionally signifies attentiveness, authority, and seriousness.

Conceptually, Zartaj Gul act as a carrier of symbolic meaning. Her visual appearance aligns with that of a competent and attentive political figure, while the caption functions as a symbolic attribute that redefines her identity. The attribution of illogical analogy constructs her as uninformed and intellectually deficient. This juxtaposition creates an irony in the statement and ridicules her intelligence as a formal leader.

At interactive level, Zartaj Gul’s gaze is directed away from the viewer which creates an “offer” image. This offer gaze prevents engagement and positions the viewer as a detached observer who is invited to evaluate rather than empathize. The medium close-up framing establishes a formal social distance and implies familiarity with critical detachment. This places the viewer in a position of intellectual superiority which encourages mockery rather than political respect.

Camera angles further reinforce this evaluative stance. The image is captured from a slightly oblique horizontal angle which increases emotional distance and reinforces observation over involvement. The eye-level vertical angle suggests equality in power relations between the viewer and the politician. But this perceived equality is undermined by the irony of the caption which places the viewer at superior position to mock her.

There is central role of compositional features in meaning-making. The image of Zartaj Gul is placed at the top indicating idealised political image while the ironic text is placed at the bottom that contradicts this ideal. Zartaj Gul is centrally positioned in the bright light ensuring maximum attention, while blurring the background figures. Saliency is heightened through bright lighting and bold text fonting which enables immediate

cognitive linkage between the image and the caption. The inclusion of her name explicitly anchors the statement to her identity and leaves little room for ambiguity.

At intersemiotic level, the text and image work synergistically to elicit humour. Moreover, the socially shared knowledge about the statement that Zartaj Gul gave during her interview regarding Covid-19 is also crucial in understanding or decoding the hidden humour in the meme. The image or text cannot stand alone to evoke humour. Due to this relationship a semiotic tension is being created between the formal image of Zartaj Gul and the informal and illogical statement to enhance humour. The visual and idealised credibility of the politician- Zartaj Gul is being destroyed by the absurdity of the text and thus the meme results in mocking her intellect and delegitimizes her competence.

4.1.3. Meme 3 Analysis



Figure 3. Mocking Sherry Rehman's Facial features

The image portrays a Pakistani female political leader-Sherry Rehman from PPP party. This is a candid selfie of her taken by herself but it is used with a caption by the memer in order to ridicule her. This recontextualization shifts the image from a confident self-representation to a tool for aesthetic judgment and mockery.

From representational perspective, Sherry Rehman is the sole participant who is depicted through a partial close-up of her face. She is wearing a scarf adorned with stone-like embellishments and matching spherical earrings. Her facial features and expressions including her slight smile, widened eyes, plumped cheeks, prominent eyebrows, and dramatic eye makeup are visually foregrounded. There is no action or reaction process involved in the meme rather it operates through a conceptual process. Sherry Rehman acts as a carrier, while her facial features and expressions serve as symbolic attributes. These

attributes draw attention towards her looks, appearance and identity instead of focusing on her achievements, competence and leadership trivializing her political legitimacy. The text on the top also acts as symbolic attribute extending commentary about beauty standards and artificial enhancement through cosmetic surgery. This amplifies the judgement women faces on their appearance to get acceptable in any field rather than their competence.

At interactive level, Sherry Rehman's direct gaze establishes a demand image and creates an immediate connection with the viewer. This demanding gaze implies both confidence as well as connection but the text on the top reframes this confidence as excessive self-display and turns it into an object of ridicule through the use of visual metaphor. The close-up shot minimizes social distance and creates a sense of intimacy and familiarity while simultaneously isolating her face for scrutiny. This framing encourages the viewer to focus on appearance to facilitate judgment rather than engagement with her political identity.

Camera angles further contribute to this evaluative stance. The frontal horizontal angle establishes visual involvement and invites the viewer into a direct relationship with the represented participant. The eye-level vertical angle suggests equal and neutral relationships between the viewer and Sherry Rehman in terms of power, but this equality seems to be ironical pretention to enable judgement with the help of text and places the viewer in superior position by giving authority to the viewer to judge and ridicule her appearance.

Compositional features further strengthen the meme's reductionist logic. The text is placed at the top that shows ideal information and frames interpretation and guides meaning-making. The image is placed at the bottom that shows real information to be reinterpreted through the lens provided by the caption. Saliency is heightened through central positioning of Sherry Rehman's. High lighting, sharp texture, and visual contrast further accentuate her facial features. While the bold font and emoji in the text amplify emotional ridicule and steer the viewer towards a mocking interpretation. This overall framing reinforces reductionist portrayal, emphasizing her appearance over her competence and political legitimacy.

At Inter-semiotic level, the image and text work together and co-construct the meaning. Visually the image portrays Sherry Rehman as confident and empowered woman, but the text then draws viewer's attention towards her appearance and turns her empowerment as mere ridicule. The image alone cannot convey the hidden abstract meaning; it needs text to guide the viewer's interpretation and understand the visual metaphor in order to mock or ridicule Sherry Rehman, by reducing her identity and amplifying the concept of women's appearance as something worth considering over her

leadership and achievements. Thus, this image-text combination delegitimizes her professional presence and mocks her identity.

4.1.4. Meme 4 Analysis



Figure 4: Maryum Nawaz as Corrupt Leader

Translated: (kid: What do you like in food Aunt?

Maryam Nawaz: Punjab).

At Representational level, the meme depicts Maryum Nawaz-a Pakistani female leader from PMLN party, seated beside a small kid. She is depicted as typical female leader in her traditional attire. The meme constructs a political critique that reframes a seemingly warm interaction into an accusation of greed and hegemonic control with the use of satire and metonymy in the caption.

The image implies implies subtle and not overt actional process that is performed by both the participants. The child's hand resting on his chin implying inquiry, while Maryam's mirrored gesture indicates contemplation. Their mutual gaze and gestures constructs a reactionary process where both participants act as reactors in an implied conversational exchange.

Maryam Nawaz is acting as a carrier whose identity is symbolically constructed through visual and linguistic attributes. Her facial expressions and gestures including composed posture, reflective hand gesture, and faintly sarcastic smile act as symbolic attributes and convey confidence and authority. These attributes are reinforced by the caption which operates as a symbolic attribute that ideologically frames her response. The word “Punjab” functions metonymically and transforms a literal question about food into a metaphor for political possession and dominance. This framing depicts Maryum as someone who views Punjab not as a province to serve but as an object of ownership and constructs her identity as greedy, corrupt, and hegemonic. The kid also serves as a symbolic figure and represents the innocent public whose naïve question becomes a narrative trigger that exposes and critiques Maryam’s political character.

From interactive perspective, both participants avoid direct gaze at the viewer and creates an offer image. This offer gaze allows the viewer to be an observer rather than an interlocutor who is invited to evaluate the interaction from a distance. The medium shot reduces social distance and creates a sense of familiarity while maintaining observational detachment. The oblique horizontal camera angle reinforces emotional detachment and discourages personal identification. The eye-level vertical angle suggests equality between the viewer and the participants, but this visual neutrality is overturned by the caption which discursively elevates the viewer into a dominant position to mock her as political figure.

At compositional level, Maryam is placed on the left side and it shows “given” information while the kid appears on the right as “new” information and guides the viewer’s reading path. The caption is placed at the top that reveals ideal information and frames the interpretation. While the image below provides real information that visually supports the satire. Salience is achieved through lighting and posture as Maryam appears more brightly lit and visually prominent than the kid and thus diverts attention towards her expressions and gestures. The image possesses a warm and maternal expression that makes the accusation claimed in the text more sharp and ironic.

At Inter-semiotic level, the image-text combination helps to decode the layered meaning. The question of the child (What do you like to eat in food, Aunt?) appears to be innocent but Maryum’s response (Punjab) reveals the textual satire through the use of metonymy. It implies her political dominance, control and possession over Province Punjab as a politician and thus assigns the political motive to a soft or maternal expression image. This inter-semiotic dissonance intensifies satire as the visual portrayal becomes the ironic platform for the textual ideological sting.

4.1.5. Meme 5 Analysis



Figure 5: Maryum Nawaz as Non-serious Leader

Translated: (Forget the country; fun should not be stopped).

The meme depicts Maryam Nawaz, a female political leader from the PML-N party, seated at a driving simulator with training facility. She is accompanied by a female police officer and a cameraman acting as observers. The caption reframes the scene satirically and transforms a simulated exercise into a critique of political performativity.

From representational perspective, the meme depicts three participants. Maryam Nawaz act as primary actor, a female police officer act as an institutional observer, and a cameraman act as a media agent. Maryam is dressed in traditional Pakistani attire with a dupatta which reinforces her political and cultural identity. The police officer's uniform signifies state authority and surveillance. The cameraman foregrounds the presence of media mediation. Maryum is portrayed in a clear action process as her focused gaze on the screen and her hands gripping the steering wheel form vectors. In contrast, the police officer participates in a reactional process as she is observing Maryam's performance. The cameraman's posture and equipment indicate intentional recording and documentation thus forming vector.

Maryam Nawaz is acting as a carrier around whom symbolic meanings are constructed. The driving simulator symbolizes controlled leadership and acts as metaphor for simulated environment, not the real one. Lady police officer symbolizes institutional

endorsement or surveillance. The cameraman represents orchestrated publicity and strategic image-making. All these elements frame the scene as staged rather than spontaneous. The caption anchors this symbolism and portrays Maryam as politically irresponsible and self-indulgent who prioritizes personal amusement over national responsibility. These symbolic attributes thus critique the performative nature of leadership and reduce her political role to performativity.

At interactive level, Maryam Nawaz does not engage the viewer directly as her gaze is fixed on the simulator screen and it creates an offer image. This gaze places the viewer as an external observer who is invited to evaluate rather than empathize. The medium shot establishes moderate social distance and creates a sense of familiarity with critical detachment. This framing prevents emotional involvement and reinforces the viewer's role as a judgmental onlooker.

Maryam is depicted from a frontal horizontal angle that makes her primary focus of attention and evaluation while the lady officer appears at a slightly oblique angle and is visually marginalized as a secondary figure. The slight low vertical angle shot grants Maryam a semblance of authority but this perceived power is undermined by the context of simulation and thus intensified by the caption's irony.

Compositional features further reinforce the meme's ideological stance. The simulator screen appears on the left as given information whereas Maryam's presence on the right places her in questionable state as "new" information. The text is placed on the top as ideal information that frames the interpretation, while the image below reveals real information as simulator driving is symbolized ironically as fake leadership. Maryam occupies the central position that ensures maximum salience. Her bright blue attire contrasts sharply with the muted background and catches immediate attention. This tight framing foregrounds the act of driving and invites the viewer to evaluate it critically.

At inter-semiotic level, the meme depicts Maryam involved in the act of driving but after reading the caption on the top it implies as she is not concerned with the national responsibilities or is not serious about her country's well-being rather she is more concerned about her public image-making, as the portrayal of cameraman and lady police officer ironically symbolizes. This irony constructs an ideology where Maryam as a political leader is viewed as non-serious, disconnected with the country's responsibilities, performative and more concerned towards her public image.

The findings of the meme analyses reflect the use of different linguistic devices such as metaphor, juxtaposition, irony, satire, metonymy etc. for negative, stereotypical and gendered representation of women leaders in Pakistani political memes. These findings corroborate with the study by Sultana et al. (2023) that reveal the influential role

of linguistic devices in shaping perception of gender roles. Similarly, findings by Mahfouz (2021) illustrate that textual captions (with integrated linguistic devices) reinforce stereotypical visual framing in Men vs Women memes through the use of Multimodal discourse analysis, align with the present study findings. The analysis of memes reveals that linguistic and visual cues in political memes disseminate patriarchal narratives as well as traditional gender roles. This finding surfaces in line with the research by Singh and Lunyal (2025) who highlight the use of images and language in everyday social media content across different social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, X, Youtube) in reinforcing patriarchal ideologies and gender roles through the use of Multimodal discourse analysis.

The findings of the present study also reveal the ideological role of humour in Pakistani political memes and is in alignment with prior research. This also mirrors with the observation by Pettersson et al. (2022) that reveals, misogynistic ideologies are disguised as humour in memes and thus memes perpetuate gender biases in such cunning way and with findings by Lomotey (2020) that reveal the functioning of humour as discursive veil for misogyny. Together, these studies demonstrate the subtle use of linguistic strategies in memes and online discourse to construct and reinforce gender stereotypes.

The memes that have been analysed in this study reinforces a dominant theme of stereotypical portrayals of women that are in power. For instance, female leaders are delegitimized over competence(meme3), they are mocked and objectified for their appearance(meme4), slammed and stigmatized over their character(meme1), ridiculed for power and greed(meme8) and trivialized over their leadership roles(meme10). With the application of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) three metafunctions and Royce (2006) intersemiotic complementarity, this study scrutinizes the framing of women as objects of satire and mockery rather than subjects of political authority (Shahid et al., 2021; Mehboob & Alvi, 2021).

The finding of meme1 suggests the acceptance of Western humanitarian (Angelina Jolie) as authentic and undermine the local female leader (Maryum Nawaz) by calling her empathy as fraud or a mere pretend in the eyes of public and thus highlights the mistrust in Pakistani female leaders and fosters postcolonial undertones. This finding aligns with Villasanta, Caringal-Go, Manaois, Ofreneo, and Canoy (2022) and Harvard Political Review (2022) who reveal that political memes reduce the identity of female politician to emotional caricatures and frames their empathy as fake and undermines their authority as political actors.

The finding of meme3 reveals the depiction of women leaders in political memes as incompetent and undermines their intellect. This finding aligns with the research on Facebook memes featuring Pakistan's political personalities by Qazi et al. (2022) who concluded that among all the textual frames applied, the frame of incompetent leader occupies the prominent position in memes.

The finding of meme4 highlight the interplay of visual and linguistic cues in constructing the identity of female leaders as aesthetic subjects targeting and mocking their appearance and trivializing their political agency. This aligns with Mahfouz (2021) whose findings show that online memes emphasize the physical appearance of women, their domestic roles, emotion and in this way marginalize their identity. This finding further echoes the concept of "aesthetic policing" as discussed by Banet-Weiser (2018, p.92) in her book: *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, where women appearances are constantly judged and they are subjected to rigid standards of femininity, beauty and behaviour as a form of control.

The findings of meme8 and 10 reveal the power hunger, greediness, corruption, performativity and the non-serious attitude of female leader towards her responsibilities as a leader, trivializing her leadership role. Such representations undermine her agency and political credibility (Villasanta et al., 2022).

The findings of memes analyses reveal that all the analysed memes either directly or indirectly subvert the authority and credibility of female leaders by depicting them as performative and detached(meme10), incompetent(meme3), fake(meme1), corrupt(meme8), and objectified through appearance(meme4). These portrayals coordinate with the findings by Villasanta et al. (2022) that reflect gendered double standards and draw insights into how female leaders are judged diversely based on their appearance and emotional expression rather than their political authority and competence, particularly in digital media.

Memes disseminate dominant ideologies disguised as humour. For instance, Meme 1 reveals the ideology of postcolonial influence and meme3,4 by targeting women leader intellect and appearance perpetuates sexist ideology and disempowerment of women leaders through objectification and the memes8,10 perpetuate gendered delegitimization of women leadership. In this regard, memes not only function as source of entertainment due to their humorous nature but also act as potent tools for political persuasion (Huntington, 2017; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020) by integrating complex ideological messages in multimodal formats.

The discussion of the findings thus demonstrates that political memes function as multimodal texts and prove to be potent tools for political persuasion and encode gendered

ideologies with the combination and use of image-text synergistic relationship (Huntington, 2017; Royce, 2006)

With this analytical discussion of memes analyses, it is also important to discuss the broader thematic patterns that emerge across the dataset. The following graph of the table 1. illustrates the patterns that dominate the discourse.

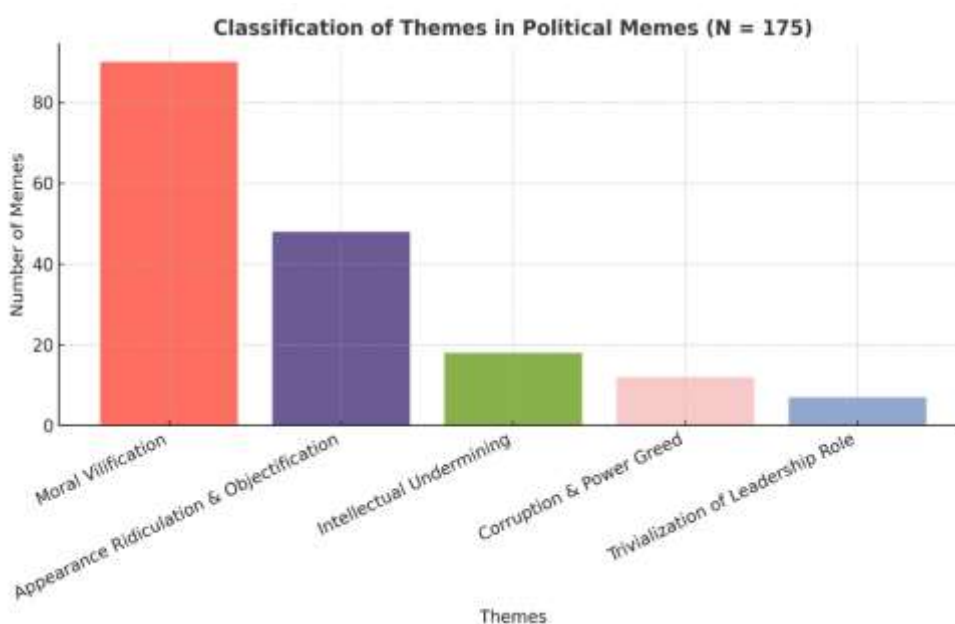


Figure 6. Graphical Representation of Themes

This graphical representation of themes across the meme's dataset reflects diverse forms of gendered stereotypes within Pakistani political discourse. The theme of moral vilification appears to be dominant with the representation of 90 memes, and it reveals the constant as well as continued social and cultural policing of women's morality in public life. This aligns with Banet-Weiser (2018) discussion regarding the concept of political misogyny as a cultural force regulating women's visibility and legitimacy. The next dominant theme, appearance ridiculation and objectification with 48 memes emphasizes that women are judged on the basis of culturally ingrained aesthetic standards instead of their credibility and political actions. The discussion of women objectification within South Asian narratives by Arshad (2021) and the findings of Pakistani memes by Shahid et al. (2021) portraying women as being targeted and judged for their appearance, resonates with this pattern. The theme of intellectual undermining (18 memes) proves to be consistent with the findings by Drakett et al. (2018) who highlight the use of online sexist humour as a weapon to frame women as incompetent and unfit for authority. The theme

of corruption and power greed (12 memes) reveals broader political and cultural frustrations that frame women in power as opportunistic. This echoes the findings about gender hate speech by Mehboob and Alvi (2021), that delegitimize women authority. The theme of trivialization of leadership role (7 memes) further belittles female politicians by framing them as non-serious and incapable of governance. This mirrors normalization of misogynistic trend in global research on sexist humour (Harvard Political Review, 2022; Sultana et al., 2023). Together, these themes demonstrate the functioning of memes as instruments of gendered ideologies and narratives that uses humour and satire to regulate the intelligence, morality and political legitimacy of women.

5. Conclusion

With the application of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) three meta-functions i.e. representational, interactional, compositional and Royce (2006) intersemiotic analysis, the study investigated the combination of visual and textual elements in constructing broader ideologies and framing stereotypical representations of female leaders. In this way, this study addressed key research gaps by analysing the portrayal of female politicians in Pakistani political memes.

The findings indicated that female leaders are framed as performative, corrupt, manipulative, detached from national responsibilities, immoral, incompetent and lacking basic knowledge through exaggerated linguistic and visual humour and derogatory captions. Their physical appearance including facial features were judged disproportionately and their identity was reframed, influenced by various stereotypes, undermining their leadership and questioning their legitimacy and competence (Shahid et al., 2021; Mehboob & Alvi, 2021; Khan, 2024; Villasanta et al., 2022; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The examination of interplay between visual elements (saliency, framing, angles, gaze and other compositional cues) and linguistic and lexical choices revealed that these representations are not isolated or trivial rather they draw insights into broader ideologies reflecting gender biases and patriarchal norms to delegitimize women in power (Sultana et al., 2023; Mahfouz, 2021; Drakett et al., 2018).

The findings of the study cannot be generalized due to its qualitative nature and the small sample size. The use of non-random sampling technique might omit less visible meme content. As the focus is on open-access platforms and publicly accessible memes, this might exclude private or ephemeral content. Despite reflexivity, the analysis might get influenced by cultural and political context. The data does not include comments, likes, or user demographics, restricting the analysis to visual and textual elements within each

meme. Furthermore, the present study does not attempt to evaluate the memes' truth-value or give valid verification of their political claims. However, the study offers thematic depth and cultural insight highlighting the ways memes support gendered political discourse in Pakistan.

It is hereby suggested that future studies can use more broader or large sample of memes' dataset including vast variety of social media platforms. Different studies can be carried out based on audience reception as how different demographics interpret these memes by taking interviews and doing surveys in order to reveal whether the audience interpret these memes as stereotypical, humorous and politically influential. Moreover, future studies can do a comparative analysis portraying both male and female leaders in political memes and between memes from different cultural contexts.

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