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MEMES AS MULTIMODAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE 2024 PAKISTANI GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

In the digital age, political memes have emerged as powerful tools for shaping public opinion and political discourse. This study explores the role of memes in constructing political narratives during the highly charged 2024 Pakistani general elections. Using a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach, this article examines a corpus of 20 political memes circulated on Twitter (X) to investigate how they combine textual, visual, and symbolic elements to communicate political ideologies, reinforce existing beliefs, and challenge dominant narratives. The findings reveal that memes functioned as potent instruments for the delegitimization of political rivals, the construction of a heroic narrative around Imran Khan, the weaponization of data, and the facilitation of emotional catharsis through satire. The study concludes that far from being trivial entertainment, memes are sophisticated digital artifacts that play a critical role in democratic engagement, ideological contestation, and the formation of collective political identities in hybrid media systems.

Keywords: *Digital Political Communication, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Narrative Construction, Pakistan Elections, Political Memes, Public Opinion, Satire, Social Media*

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1. Introduction

The landscape of political communication has undergone a radical transformation with the ascendancy of social media platforms. Traditional gatekeepers of political information—news organizations and institutional politicians—have been joined, and often circumvented, by a multitude of voices, enabling a more democratized, albeit fragmented, public sphere. Within this digital ecosystem, the internet meme has evolved from a simple vehicle for humor into a sophisticated form of political commentary and persuasion. This is particularly true in contexts of intense political polarization, such as the 2024 Pakistani general elections.

This article argues that political memes are complex multimodal texts that perform significant discursive work. They are not merely reflections of political sentiment but active agents in constructing narratives, shaping voter perception, and mobilizing electoral bases. Focusing on the 2024 Pakistani elections, a period marked by intense contestation and allegations of electoral manipulation, this study employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to deconstruct how memes blend visual and linguistic modes to achieve persuasive ends. By analyzing a selection of memes that gained significant traction, this research sheds light on the strategies used to influence the political landscape in a key democratic process.

2. Theoretical Framework: Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

This study is grounded in the principles of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; 2006). MDA is predicated on the idea that meaning is not made through language alone but through the complex interplay of various semiotic modes—including images, color, layout, typography, and language. In the context of political memes, MDA provides the analytical tools to dissect how these elements work in concert to produce ideological messages.

Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of "visual grammar" is particularly pertinent. It allows us to analyze:

- **Representational Meanings:** How participants (politicians, symbols) are portrayed in images (e.g., as active agents or passive objects).
- **Interactive Meanings:** How the image engages the viewer through elements like gaze, perspective, and social distance.
- **Compositional Meanings:** How the arrangement of elements—through layout, salience, and information value—guides the viewer's interpretation.

When applied to memes, MDA helps uncover how a specific color palette evokes nationalist sentiment, how a caricature delegitimizes a leader, or how the juxtaposition of text and image creates ironic or satirical meaning.

3.Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design centered on MDA. The data

corpus consists of 20 political memes selected from Twitter (X) during the pre- and post-election phases of the 2024 Pakistani general elections.

3.1. Data Collection and Selection

Memes were collected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the election narrative. The selection criteria included:

1. **Direct Relevance:** Memes had to explicitly reference key election events, political figures (e.g., Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz), or major political parties (PTI, PML-N, PPP).
2. **High Engagement:** Preference was given to memes with a high number of likes, retweets, and comments, indicating significant public circulation and impact.
3. **Multimodal Richness:** Memes were chosen for their complex interplay of visual and textual elements, making them suitable for in-depth MDA.

4. Analytical Procedure

Each meme was subjected to a systematic analysis using the framework of MDA. This involved:

1. Deconstructing visual elements (imagery, color, composition, symbolism).
2. Analyzing textual elements (captions, hashtags, language choices, tone).
3. Synthesizing how these modes interact to create a cohesive, persuasive political narrative.
4. Identifying recurring themes and rhetorical strategies across the dataset.

5. Analysis and Findings

The MDA of the meme corpus revealed four predominant thematic functions in the political discourse of the 2024 elections.

1. Delegitimization of Political Rivals



A primary function of the memes was to attack and undermine political opponents, particularly the leadership of the PML-N and PPP. This was achieved through blatant labeling and visual caricature.

- **Visual Strategy:** One prominent meme featured Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz Sharif, and Maryam Nawaz with the word "THIEF" stamped across them in bold, red letters. The color red, symbolizing danger and anger, was used to provoke a visceral response. Their poses, which originally conveyed celebration, were recontextualized to signify illegitimate victory.
- **Textual Strategy:**
  Hashtags like #MandateThieves and #Election2024rigging accompanied these images, reinforcing the accusation and aggregating content under a unified narrative. The textual accusation transformed the visual from a mere picture into an indictment.
- **Ideological Effect:** This multimodal combination served to frame the opposing coalition not as legitimate competitors but as corrupt criminals who had stolen the

public's mandate, effectively eroding their legitimacy in the eyes of supportive audiences.

6. Construction of the Heroic Narrative: Imran Khan as the Symbol of Hope



In stark contrast to the delegitimization of rivals, memes supporting Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party worked to construct a heroic and hopeful narrative.

- **Visual Strategy:** A powerful meme mimicked Shepard Fairey's iconic "HOPE" poster of Barack Obama. It featured a determined, forward-marching Imran Khan in color, superimposed over a grayscale portrait. The use of blue in his clothing connoted stability and trust, while the grayscale background suggested a troubled past he was leaving behind. The composition positioned him as an active agent of change moving toward a brighter future.
- **Textual Strategy:** The single, bold word "HOPE" acted as an anchoring device, guiding the interpretation of the visual. The lack of additional text or party slogans created a minimalist, iconic quality, allowing the message to be universally absorbed and reducing Khan to a pure symbol of aspiration.
- **Ideological Effect:** This meme exemplified how multimodal design can distill a complex political campaign into a simple, emotionally resonant identity. It framed Khan not just as a politician, but as the embodiment of a national desire for change and moral renewal.

  Data as a Political Weapon : Memes were also used to weaponize data, presenting selective statistics to create a veneer of factual legitimacy for partisan claims.
- **Visual Strategy:** An "Unofficial Scorecard" meme presented a bar graph showing PTI-backed independents far ahead of other parties. The visual disproportion of the bars—PTI's bar was dramatically larger—emphasized their alleged dominance, regardless of the numerical accuracy.

- **Textual Strategy:** The use of the word "Unofficial" is a key rhetorical move. It simultaneously acknowledges the contested nature of the results while positioning the meme's narrative as the "real" truth suppressed by official channels. Hashtags like #Form45 (referencing a key election form) were used to signal insider knowledge and factual authority.
- **Ideological Effect:** By adopting the visual language of data journalism (graphs, numbers), these memes leveraged the cultural authority of statistics to legitimize a specific political outcome and fuel distrust in official electoral institutions.
  Satire and Emotional Catharsis: Perhaps the most culturally significant function was the use of humor and satire to process collective disappointment and foster solidarity among supporters.
- **Visual Strategy:** The "Ek Dum Se Waqt Badal Diya" meme used a two-panel format. The top panel showed official, disappointing election results for a PTI candidate, while the bottom panel featured a viral video of a young man comically exaggerating his emotional devastation.
- **Textual Strategy:** The humorous caption ("Suddenly, time changed, emotions changed, life changed") and the crying-laughing emojis used by sharers framed the political loss within a relatable idiom of personal melodrama.
- **Ideological Effect:** This meme did not aim to persuade neutrals but to provide emotional catharsis for those already sharing the sentiment. It transformed collective frustration into a shared joke, building in-group solidarity and resilience through irony. It allowed users to acknowledge defeat while simultaneously mocking the process that led to it, thus refusing to grant the outcome full legitimacy.

7.Discussion

The findings demonstrate that political memes are a primary site of ideological labor in digital campaigns. They are tactical tools used to simplify complex political realities into emotionally charged, shareable narratives. The 2024 election memes did not merely comment on politics; they were active participants in the political process, performing crucial functions:

1. **Agenda-Setting and Framing:** Memes set the agenda by focusing public attention on specific issues—rigging, leadership, hope—and framed these issues in a highly partisan manner, drawing on populist discourses that pitted a corrupt elite against the righteous public.
2. **Mobilization and Identity Formation:** By using in-group humor and stark visual contrasts, memes strengthened collective identities (e.g., the PTI supporter as a youthful, wronged optimist) and mobilized this base through emotional appeals.

3. **Challenging Official Narratives:** The proliferation of "unofficial" data and satirical counter-narratives functioned as a form of resistance against mainstream media and state institutions, highlighting a deep crisis of legitimacy.

However, this power is a double-edged sword. The same features that make memes effective for engagement—simplification, emotionalism, and humor—also make them potent vectors for misinformation, polarization, and the erosion of nuanced public debate. The delegitimization tactics observed can intensify affective polarization, making compromise and consensus more difficult.

8.Conclusion

This study concludes that the political meme is an indispensable and powerful form of digital political communication. The analysis of the 2024 Pakistani election memes through an MDA lens reveals a sophisticated ecosystem where narrative is built not through speeches or policy papers, but through the strategic fusion of image, text, and symbol. These memes were central to the election's discursive landscape, functioning to attack opponents, build heroes, weaponize information, and manage collective emotion.

Understanding memes is therefore no longer optional for scholars, journalists, and policymakers. They are a fundamental currency of modern political engagement, particularly among younger, digital-native demographics. Future research should expand to include longitudinal studies and cross-national comparisons to further understand their evolving impact on democracies worldwide. As digital platforms continue to mediate political life, the humble meme will undoubtedly remain a key artifact for shaping the political futures of nations.