



DECODING DISSENT: A THEMATIC AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK USERS' REACTIONS TO POLITICAL SATIRE ON PAKISTANI LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This study is an investigation of both linguistic and emotional reactions of Facebook users in Pakistan to satirical messages against political leadership and the role of humour as the medium of political criticism in a media landscape where formal channels of dissent are limited. Although political satire has been an integral part of the digital discourse in Pakistan, the decoding, contestation, or reinforcement of political narratives through comments and reactions of audiences is under-studied. In this study, the author utilises a qualitative research approach that includes thematic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse seven of the most pertinent satirical posts that were selected from three Facebook pages that are popular for political satire and from the audience comments, reactions and shares generated by each of the selected satirical post. Results indicate that humor serves several and sometimes contradictory purposes here: it allows users to complain about corruption and economic disparity, offers an opportunity for disillusionment about political and civil-military institutions, and offers a non-threatening platform for dissent. The same wit often simultaneously serves as a catalyst to deepen partisan polarization, to label opposition factions disparagingly, and sometimes to lapse into abusive language of an illiberal, insulting, and gynocentric nature beyond the domain of political criticism. The study joins the emerging literature on digital communication, popular engagement and political satire in South Asia by providing an empirically supported account of how humor unites and polarizes Pakistani Facebook publics and discussing some ethical and methodological implications of engaging with openly hostile user-generated political content.

Keywords: *Audience Engagement, Critical Discourse Analysis, Digital Polarization, Facebook, Pakistan, Political Satire, Thematic Analysis*

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1. Introduction

Humor has been known to serve as a powerful commentator on socio-political issues, and it is in this way that issues of a complex and controversial nature can be discussed sideways (Shifman, 2014). Satire has become a powerful tool for capturing the audience, rousing critical awareness among them and challenging the political leadership in Pakistan, a country where politics is often tense and polarized. Social media platforms have introduced not only an increased dissemination and rapidity of satirical content, but also increased interactivity between the political process and the audience, enabling audiences to contradict, expand and comment on political stories as they unfold (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

This study explores the reaction of the audience towards satirical posts regarding political leadership in Pakistan and specifically how humor and public opinion interact in the digital realm. Satirical content, when presented in the form of irony, exaggeration, and wit, exposes political figures and policies, and provides a space to voice opinions, participate in discussion, and create shared interpretations of political events (Highfield, 2016). This research aims to analyze user comments, reactions and engagement indicators regarding the Facebook posts in order to discover themes and sentiments of audience interaction with satirical political content. One of the most important themes of the study is the capacity of humor to create a sense of community and its capacity to create divisions, as humor can foster shared understanding through collective laughter, but can also contribute to reinforcing what already exists: divisions, biases, stereotypes (Baym 2005). This bipolarity is particularly pronounced in Pakistan where political loyalties are strong and satire is an arena for conflict between opposing political narratives.

The study takes a qualitative approach using thematic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to look at the linguistic and rhetorical strategies that audiences employ when reading satirical texts. The study presents a contextual framework in the wider discourse on digital communication, political satire and public opinion, and examines the implications of the findings for digital engagement research, political communication, and the role of political satire in shaping public opinion in South Asia.

1.1. Research Objective

To explore how Pakistani Facebook users engage with and react to satirical posts about political leadership, and to investigate the role of humor in shaping political opinion and fostering dialogue or polarization within the digital public sphere.

1.2. Research Statement

This study analyses the dynamics of Facebook users' reactions to political satire concerning leadership in Pakistan, examining how humor operates as a means of critique, engagement, or polarization within broader societal attitudes and perceptions expressed online.

1.3. Research Questions

- RQ1: What are the predominant themes and sentiments expressed in audience reactions to satirical posts about political leadership on Facebook in Pakistan?
- RQ2: How does humor facilitate or hinder dialogue and engagement among audiences responding to satirical political content?
- RQ3: In what ways does satirical content about political leadership contribute to polarization or consensus within the digital public sphere in Pakistan?
- RQ4: How do audience interactions with satirical posts reflect broader societal attitudes toward political leadership in Pakistan?

2. Literature Review

Political satire has become an integral part of political discourse and is especially critical in the age of social media. Satire is not only a source of humor, it is a criticism of political leaders and institutions, indicating either their successes or failures. However, Pakistan is a country where traditional mass media is restricted and in this environment social media, and especially Facebook, plays a vital role in public expression and dissent, where satire has a significant presence in public discourse (Highfield, 2016; Riaz & Khan, 2022).

Political satire has been recognized as a key aspect of shaping political discourse, as it is a means for publics to critically engage with political issues (Baym & Jones, 2012). Sarcastic content usually draws attention to the problems of society and offers a different interpretation of the social reality than the dominant political one (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Facebook is a crucial platform for engaging in public criticism and mobilisation in politically constrained contexts.

Political satire has gained both a broader and more participatory dimension through social media, allowing people to share, comment and respond to satirical content on a large scale (Brundidge, 2010). This is in line with the Uses and Gratifications Theory which states that audiences consume media to meet their entertainment, information and social needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Political satire on social media gives people the ability to express their political opinions, keep themselves updated and find others with similar political perspectives (Ruggiero, 2000). Memes and other remixed digital artefacts are also an emerging type of political commentary, in which they are quickly imitated and varied by users (Shifman, 2014); posts in this study share some common features of image manipulation, wordplay, and captioning.

Satire has not always been a bright idea, though. Satirical content tends to be hyperbole, and can create cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), which invites viewers to reconsider their opinions and correct any gaps in their political understanding (Pivetti & Ruggiero, 2012). When satire serves to strengthen rather than question beliefs, the dissonance produced can exacerbate polarization. Similarly, Holbert, Scannell, and Lather

(2009) contend that satire can strengthen the bonds of community among those like-minded, but can also reinforce political polarization by reinforcing opinion within, as opposed to between, ideological groups.

Satire in Pakistan has an added layer of complexity in the political context. Riaz and Khan (2022) suggest that social media has now emerged as a significant medium to criticize politics and satire is a strategy of subversion to combat the existing political systems, and in this process it can promote a democratic culture. This is in line with Bennett & Iyengar's (2008) finding that political satire affects the audience's perception of the legitimacy of the political parties and leaders.

Satire may elicit affective and cognitive reactions. Freedman and Miller (2017) concluded that satire on Facebook not only serves as a means to criticize but also acts as a spark for political action together. Similarly, Jensen (2015) has been reported to have a positive effect on youth involvement in political information, but this effect has been disputed when it comes to gaining substantive political information.

While satire can help to deepen polarization, at the same time it may have the opposite effect. Litt and Hargittai (2016) state that users of satirical material tend to read information that is similar to their existing beliefs in what is termed as "echo chambers. This filtering effect enhances polarization and reduces chances of communication between opposing ideologies, particularly in Pakistan, where there are strong existing divisions along party lines.

Social media satire also poses questions of authenticity and media literacy. As Rapp & Nattermann (2019) explain, satire can be misinterpretable as well as critiquing, depending on how the audience reads and frames it. Consumers can also get confused between what is satirical and factual information in contexts where media literacy is not uniform, like in Pakistan, where they might find it difficult to determine the truth of a message when it is consistent with - or inconsistent with - their political stance.

Overall, political satire in social media is a potent form of civic participation and critique but it can also fuel polarization and exacerbate existing social cleavages. With Facebook playing such a significant role in influencing the public opinion in Pakistan, it is still a matter of interest to study the way satire has been operating in the political discourse in Pakistan and how audiences are interpreting and reacting to it.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on three interrelated theories. First, Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973) suggests that audience use of satirical posts is goal-directed activity, directed towards enjoyment, information and social affiliation. Second, by focusing on polarization, it builds on the concept of the "echo chamber" (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) and the literature on selective exposure (Fiorini, 2004; Huck, 2010; McCullers, 2015), all of which help to explain why satirical humor that attacks one

political party tends to be reinforced by users who tend to support that party and attacked by users who tend to oppose it. Third, following Fairclough's (1995) three-part model of text, discourse, and society, these close readings of comments will be preceded by a brief analysis of audience and audience comments. Third, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) broadly following Fairclough's (1995) three dimensional model of text, discourse and society will be used to read the comments more closely: at the textual level, the analysis will focus on the lexical choices, code switching between Urdu, Roman Urdu and English, rhetorical devices (e.g., irony, hyperbole) used in these comments; at the discursive level, the analysis will be based on the discourse of the audience comments which draws from and reproduces recognisable genres of Pakistani political discourse (e.g., corruption narratives, civil-military critique, anti-elite rhetoric); at the level of social practice the analysis will situate these linguistic patterns in the broader socio-political setting that the literature review identifies as shaping Pakistani digital discourse, such as media restrictions, economic difficulties, and partisan polarization. All three lenses provide a descriptive (recurring themes) and interpretive (why certain linguistic and rhetorical strategies are employed, and what social work they do) analysis.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine audience reactions to satirical posts about political leadership in Pakistan, combining thematic analysis with elements of Critical Discourse Analysis. Facebook was selected as the primary data source given its role as the dominant platform for political satire in Pakistan.

4.1. Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique was used to select seven highly engaging satirical posts about political leadership from three Facebook pages widely recognized for political satire (Sarcastic Azaan, Greenistan, Azfar Jamal Warsi, Waseem Mubashar Official, and Malik Mateen). Posts were selected on the basis of engagement volume - number of reactions, comments, and shares - to ensure that each post had generated substantial audience response. For each post, the researcher extracted a representative, non-exhaustive sample of user comments and reaction data (likes, shares, emoji reactions), and categorized comments by tone (supportive, critical, humorous, or dissenting) to identify patterns in audience response. Given the very large comment volume on some posts (in excess of 4,000 comments in one case), the analysis draws on a purposively selected representative subset of comments per post rather than a full census; this is a methodological choice appropriate to qualitative thematic analysis but is also a limitation that is addressed explicitly in Section 7.

4.2. Data Analysis

Comments were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing

themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Coding focused on three broad areas identified a priori from the literature: (a) perceptions of political leadership, (b) uses of humor as critique, and (c) emotional and cognitive reactions to satire. Codes were then organized into the more granular thematic categories reported in Section 5 (e.g., "criticism of political corruption," "mockery and humor," "political allegiance and division"). Coding was conducted manually by the researcher; as a single-coder qualitative study, no inter-rater reliability statistic is reported, and this is acknowledged as a limitation. Quantitative engagement metrics (reaction counts, comment counts, share counts) were used to contextualize and supplement - rather than substitute for - the qualitative thematic analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis was applied to a subset of illustrative comments to examine the linguistic and rhetorical strategies audiences use - code-switching, irony, hyperbole, derogatory labelling - and to connect these strategies to the broader socio-political dynamics discussed in Section 3.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

All data were drawn from publicly accessible Facebook posts and comments. No private groups, restricted content or direct messages were accessed. To protect individual privacy, no commenter names, profile identifiers, or profile images are reported anywhere in this study; comments are reproduced without attribution to individual accounts. Because several posts attracted large volumes of vulgar, sexually explicit, or otherwise abusive language directed at named public figures, such material is discussed and categorized thematically in Section 5, but the most explicit excerpts have been paraphrased or redacted rather than reproduced verbatim, in line with standard ethical practice for publishing offensive user-generated content in academic outlets. This study followed standard institutional guidelines for research using publicly available, non-sensitive social media data, consistent with the principle that analysis of open, public posts not involving direct interaction with participants typically qualifies for ethical exemption or expedited review.

4.4. Trustworthiness and Limitations of the Method

Rigor was supported through the purposive sampling criteria stated above, a documented coding process, and the triangulation of qualitative thematic findings with quantitative engagement metrics. As is characteristic of qualitative research, the findings are context-specific and interpretive rather than statistically generalizable; specific limitations are discussed in Section 7.

4.5. Overview of Sampled Posts

Table 1 summarizes the seven posts analyzed in this study, including source page, publication date where available, and engagement metrics at the time of data collection.

Post	Page/Account	Date	Reactions	Comments	Shares
1. PPP / Bhutto-Quaid-e-Azam	Sarcastic Azaan	5 Sep 2023	72,000	2,000	35,000
2. Imran Khan jail satire	Greenistan	n.d.	3,500	512	826
3. Stock Exchange satire	Sarcastic Azaan	1 Dec 2024	9,700	231	14,000
4. Foreign policy / USA satire	Sarcastic Azaan	21 Dec 2024	1,900	95	528
5. "Abu G" 5G/3G satire (reel)	Azfar Jamal Warsi	n.d.	2,600	40	n/r
6. "Badrang Baloch" image satire	Waseem Mubashar Official	30 Mar (year n/r)	29,000	4,100	3,700
7. Ramadan/Shaitan satire	Malik Mateen	30 Mar 2024	25,000	2,000	3,300

Note: n/r = not reported in the original source data.

5. Findings

This section presents the thematic analysis of each of the seven sampled posts and their associated audience comments. Themes are presented descriptively first, followed by a cross-post synthesis and discussion in Section 6.

5.1 Post 1: Satirical Commentary on the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)

"Jin Gharon s Bhutto ko Nikalna Tha, wahan sy Quaid e Azam ki tasweeren nikal rahi hain wo bhi kharbon ki tadaad me."

Translation: "The houses from which Bhutto was meant to emerge are instead yielding pictures of Quaid-e-Azam, in vast quantities."

Published on 5 September 2023 on the page Sarcastic Azaan, this post critiques the PPP leadership in the context of a corruption scandal involving large sums of cash discovered in a party leader's home. It plays on the party's well-known slogan about Bhutto's endurance, substituting Quaid-e-Azam's image (printed on Pakistani currency) to imply that concealed wealth, not political legacy, is what actually emerges from party leaders' homes. The post received approximately 72,000 reactions (54,000 Likes, 15,000

Laughs, and smaller counts of Sad, Wow, Heart, Angry, and Love reactions), roughly 2,000 comments, and 35,000 shares.

Recurring themes in the comments included:

- Criticism of political corruption - commenters repeatedly linked the imagery of hidden currency to broader disillusionment with the gap between PPP's public rhetoric and its leaders' private conduct.
- Mockery and humor - many comments consisted of short expressions of amusement, signalling recognition of the post's irony as a coping mechanism for political frustration.
- Partisan division - comments split between expressions of continued loyalty to PPP (e.g., invoking the party's historic slogans) and pointed criticism of that same loyalty in light of the corruption allegations.
- Economic disparity - several commenters connected the post to broader frustration over inequality between the political elite and ordinary citizens.
- Distrust of the post's veracity - a subset of commenters dismissed the claims as "fake news," reflecting broader skepticism toward politically charged content shared on social media.

5.2. Post 2: Imran Khan's Imprisonment - Satirical Commentary

"Main nahi bachega idhr mar jae ga main."

Translation: "I won't survive; I will die here."

Posted by the page Greenistan (408,000 followers), this post satirizes the dramatic tone surrounding former Prime Minister Imran Khan's imprisonment, exaggerating concern for his welfare to comment on the broader political tension surrounding his legal situation. The post received approximately 3,500 reactions, 512 comments, and 826 shares.

- Political commentary and criticism - many comments compared Khan's treatment in custody with that of other political figures, reflecting perceptions of inconsistency in how the justice system treats different leaders.
- Overseas Pakistanis' frustration - a substantial cluster of comments diverged from the post's specific subject to discuss the hardships of Pakistanis working abroad, using the post as an occasion to voice broader economic grievance.
- National frustration and disillusionment - several comments expressed a sense of hopelessness about the country's political and economic trajectory.
- Humor as coping - many comments used sarcasm and exaggerated language, and a minority explicitly criticized the practice of making light of a serious political and human situation.
- Calls for reform - some comments called for citizens to "work hard" domestically or return home to contribute to change, rather than emigrating.

5.3. Post 3: Pakistan Stock Exchange Satire

*"Pakistan Stock Exchange se guzarish hai ke akelay ooper na jaye,
awaam ko bhi saath saath le kar jaye."*

Translation: "A request to the Pakistan Stock Exchange: please
don't rise alone - take the public along with you."

Posted on 1 December 2024 by Sarcastic Azaan, this post comments on the disconnect between a rising stock market and the deteriorating economic conditions faced by ordinary Pakistanis, implicitly critiquing political and economic elites for benefiting from policies that leave the wider public behind. The post received approximately 9,700 reactions, 231 comments, and 14,000 shares.

- Frustration with economic inequality - comments repeatedly contrasted market gains with rising inflation, unemployment, and living costs.
- Criticism of political and bureaucratic elites - several comments accused political leaders and the bureaucracy of prioritizing self-enrichment over public welfare.
- Perceived market manipulation - a number of comments expressed skepticism that the stock market's rise reflected genuine economic improvement, framing it instead as elite manipulation.
- Humor and sarcasm - comments used wordplay and dark humor (e.g., ironic references to the market rising "toward heaven") to express economic despair.
- Skepticism toward media coverage - some commenters accused the media of concealing the true state of the economy in favor of narratives that benefit the powerful.
- Calls for accountability - a smaller subset of comments explicitly called for leadership accountability and more inclusive economic policy.

5.4. Post 4: Foreign Policy Satire

*"Hamari kharija policy America tay karta hai, magar hum America
ke hamare missiles par bayaan ki muzammat karte hain."*

Translation: "Our foreign policy is dictated by America, yet we
condemn America's statements about our missiles."

Posted by Sarcastic Azaan on 21 December 2024, this post critiques the perceived contradiction between Pakistan's dependence on the United States for economic and military support and its public displays of defiance toward American positions on issues such as missile capability. The post received approximately 1,900 reactions, 95 comments, and 528 shares.

- Perceived hypocrisy - comments highlighted the contradiction between public criticism of U.S. influence and continued dependence on American financial and military support.

- Dependency framing - several comments characterized Pakistan as a client state whose foreign and domestic policy is substantially shaped by U.S. and IMF interests.
- Criticism of specific leaders and parties - commenters linked foreign-policy inconsistency to specific political and military figures, citing shifts in position around key diplomatic events.
- National sovereignty and pride - some comments called for a more independent foreign policy stance and framed continued alignment with the U.S. as a loss of national dignity.
- Polarized labelling - commenters used partisan shorthand (e.g., labels for rival factions) to criticize opposing political camps, reflecting entrenched polarization.

5.5. Post 5: "Abu G" - Satire on Political and Military Authority

"Duniya 5G se 3G aur 4G ki taraf ja rahi hai jab ke Pakistan Abu G se 3G aur 4G ki taraf ja raha hai..."

Translation: "The world is moving from 5G toward faster connectivity, while Pakistan moves backward under the direction of 'Abu G'; whatever 'Abu G' decides - including internet or social media shutdowns - is what happens..."

Posted as a video reel by the page Azfar Jamal Warsi (214,000 followers), this post uses the coded label "Abu G" to satirize the perceived influence of unelected authority over Pakistan's political and digital environment, juxtaposing "state power" against "street power." The post received approximately 2,600 reactions and 40 comments.

- Political criticism and discontent - comments criticized both civilian political leaders and military figures, using historical betrayal narratives (e.g., comparisons to Mir Jafar) as a rhetorical device.
- Skepticism about unelected authority - commenters expressed distrust of the military establishment's role in political decision-making, framing it through the "street power versus state power" dichotomy raised in the post.
- Sarcasm and coded labelling - commenters used euphemistic and sarcastic labels for authority figures rather than naming them directly, a linguistic strategy that allows criticism while limiting direct exposure.
- Calls for political change - a subset of comments explicitly called for systemic political change or "revolution."
- National pride - some comments articulated a desire for Pakistani sovereignty free from both domestic unelected influence and foreign pressure.

5.6 Post 6: "Badrang Baloch" - Image-Based Satire

This post, shared by the page Waseem Mubashar Official (65,000 followers) on 30 March, features a digitally altered image of former Prime Minister Imran Khan wearing a

traditional headscarf, captioned with wordplay contrasting "Mahrang" (radiant) with "Badrang" (faded) - an allusion to Baloch rights activist Mahrang Baloch. The post received approximately 29,000 reactions, 4,100 comments, and 3,700 shares, making it the most-commented post in the sample.

Given the very high comment volume, the analysis below draws on a representative sample of Urdu and Roman Urdu comments; a substantial share of the full comment thread consisted of brief affirmations, emoji, and one-word replies that are not analytically substantive and were excluded from thematic coding.

- Political criticism and discontent - a large share of comments condemned Khan in strongly negative terms (e.g., labelling him a "traitor" or accusing him of serving foreign interests), reflecting deep dissatisfaction among a segment of users.
- Sarcasm and mockery - the edited image itself prompted extensive wordplay and mocking commentary building on the "Mahrang/Badrang" pun.
- Political defense and loyalty - a substantial counter-current of comments defended Khan, citing his record on healthcare and education infrastructure and framing him as a victim of institutional conspiracy - illustrating the sharply polarized reception of the same post.
- Religious and moral framing - some comments invoked religious or moral vocabulary to frame political loyalty as a matter of righteousness rather than policy preference.
- Distrust of the military and judicial establishment - several comments questioned the consistency of institutional narratives about Khan's political rise and fall.
- Gendered mockery - the image's use of a traditionally feminine garment prompted a cluster of comments that mocked Khan through gendered and feminizing language, using his physical presentation to question his political standing.
- Vulgar and abusive language - a portion of the comment thread (excluded from verbatim reproduction here for ethical reasons; see Section 4.3) consisted of sexually explicit and family-directed insults typical of highly polarized Pakistani political discourse. These comments are noted as a distinct category because of their prevalence and their bearing on the study's discussion of discourse toxicity (Section 6.4), but their specific content is not reproduced.
- Emotional appeals and martyrdom framing - supportive comments frequently referenced Khan's time in custody as evidence of sacrifice, constructing a narrative of political martyrdom.

5.7. Post 7: Religious Symbolism and Moral Satire During Ramadan

Shared by the page Malik Mateen (8,700 followers) on 30 March 2024, this post depicts a digitally generated image of a devil-like figure (Shaitan) thanking a figure resembling Imran Khan for "lessons learned" during Ramadan - a period in which,

according to popular religious belief, Satan is symbolically restrained. The post uses religious metaphor and inversion to critique Khan's moral and political conduct. It received approximately 25,000 reactions, 2,000 comments, and 3,300 shares.

- Political criticism using moral/religious vocabulary - a large cluster of comments condemned Khan using explicitly religious-moral terms (e.g., framing him as dishonest or corrupt in Islamic ethical terms).
- Hero worship and institutional distrust - other commenters defended Khan as a righteous leader targeted by conspiracies involving the military and judiciary, again illustrating within-thread polarization.
- Recognition of satirical irony - a smaller cluster of comments explicitly praised the post's use of religious metaphor, indicating audience appreciation of the satire's craftsmanship.
- Calls for more ethical discourse - some users objected to the abusive tone of other comments, invoking Islamic teachings on respectful speech, particularly given the religious context of Ramadan.
- Extended religious-political irony - several comments built on the post's religious framing with their own theological references to divine justice and accountability.
- Meta-humor and absurdist elaboration - a further cluster used exaggerated or fictionalized scenarios to extend the joke rather than to advance a substantive political claim.
- Vulgar and sexualized insults - as with Post 6, a portion of this thread contained explicit, family-directed abuse. Consistent with the ethical approach described in Section 4.3, this material is noted as a recurring category but not reproduced verbatim.

6. Discussion

This section synthesizes the thematic findings across all seven posts and relates them directly to the study's four research questions.

6.1. RQ1 - Predominant Themes and Sentiments

Across all seven posts, three themes recurred with particular consistency: criticism of political corruption and elite self-interest, humor and sarcasm as an interpretive and coping strategy, and partisan division expressed through loyalty or condemnation of specific leaders and parties. Sentiment was rarely uniform even within a single post's comment thread - posts targeting Imran Khan (Posts 2, 6, and 7) in particular generated sharply bifurcated sentiment, with substantial loyalist defense running alongside strong condemnation. This confirms that audience sentiment toward satire is filtered through pre-existing partisan identity rather than being determined by the post's content alone.

6.2. RQ2 - Humor's Role in Facilitating or Hindering Dialogue

Humor facilitated engagement in the sense that it lowered the threshold for participation: brief, low-effort comments (laughing emoji, short sarcastic remarks) allowed large numbers of users to register a political position quickly, which likely explains the very high reaction-to-comment ratios observed across the sample (Table 1). However, humor did not consistently facilitate dialogue in the sense of cross-ideological exchange. Comment threads more often ran in parallel - supportive and critical comments coexisting without direct engagement between opposing users - than in genuine back-and-forth debate. A partial exception was Post 7, where a subset of users explicitly called out the abusive tone of other comments, suggesting that satire can occasionally prompt reflexive commentary on the discourse itself, not just on the political target.

6.3. RQ3 - Polarization Versus Consensus

Consensus was most visible on posts targeting broadly shared economic grievances (Post 3, the Stock Exchange satire), where criticism of elite self-interest drew comments across apparent political lines. By contrast, posts targeting specific, currently contested political figures - Imran Khan above all - produced the clearest polarization, with near-symmetrical clusters of condemnation and defense within the same thread. This is consistent with the echo-chamber literature reviewed in Section 2 (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) but also complicates it: rather than each user only encountering agreeable content, several of these threads show directly opposed factions co-present in the same discursive space, suggesting that Facebook comment sections under high-engagement satirical posts can function less as echo chambers and more as adversarial arenas.

6.4. RQ4 - Broader Societal Attitudes

Audience interactions reflected several recurring societal attitudes beyond the immediate political target of each post: a pervasive sense of economic precarity, skepticism toward both civilian and military institutions, and distrust of media narratives generally. The recurrence of vulgar, family-directed insults in the two most politically charged posts (6 and 7) is itself analytically significant: it indicates that for a segment of Pakistani Facebook users, political disagreement is expressed through registers of personal and gendered degradation rather than substantive critique, a pattern consistent with broader concerns in the literature about the coarsening of online political discourse (Rapp & Nattermann, 2019). This pattern also underscores the ethical rationale, discussed in Section 4.3, for reporting this category descriptively rather than reproducing it verbatim: doing so allows the phenomenon to be documented and analyzed without amplifying the specific abusive language itself.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to seven Facebook posts drawn from a small number of pages which restricts the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific pages and time period studied. The analysis of the study is focused exclusively on users in Pakistan and

on Facebook, findings may not extend to other platforms (e.g., Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok) or to Pakistani diaspora audiences engaging from other national contexts. For the highest-volume post (Post 6, 4,100+ comments), analysis relied on a purposively selected representative sample rather than the full comment population, which may not capture the complete range of audience response. The subjectivity inherent in humor interpretation means that the thematic categories applied in this study reflect one plausible reading of the data; other researchers might reasonably code some comments differently. The analysis captures audience reactions at a single point in time; political sentiment in Pakistan is volatile, and longitudinal research would be needed to assess how these reactions evolve.

8. Future Research Directions

Future research could extend this analysis to additional platforms (Instagram, X/Twitter, TikTok) and a larger, randomly sampled set of posts to improve generalizability. Comparative studies examining how demographic factors (age, gender, region, political affiliation) shape reactions to political satire would add explanatory depth. Multi-coder designs with formal inter-rater reliability testing would strengthen methodological rigor. Finally, extending this line of inquiry to other South Asian contexts would help clarify which of the patterns identified here are specific to Pakistan's political and media environment and which reflect broader regional or global dynamics of digital political satire.

9. Conclusion

This study examined how Facebook users in Pakistan engage with satirical posts about political leadership, addressing four research questions concerning the themes and sentiments expressed (RQ1), humor's role in dialogue (RQ2), polarization versus consensus (RQ3), and broader societal attitudes (RQ4). The results reveal how humor produces a veritable double-edged sword effect in the Pakistani digital political sphere, as it simultaneously reduces the ease of political engagement and provides a common ground for vilifying corruption, economic disparity and institutional overreach, and on the other hand, reinforces partisan identity and, in the most extreme instances, it becomes insulting and derogatory towards women, an abusive tool for political criticism. The data do not show this tension as being resolved, but rather a co-residing of both functions within the same comment threads, sometimes directly juxtaposed. The present study makes an empirically informed, ethically reflective analysis of these dynamics to the ever-expanding field of research on digital communication, political satire, and audience engagement for South Asian contexts and lays out directions that need to be explored in the future – larger scale and more diverse sampling, multi-coder validation, and cross-platform comparison.

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Note: The in-text citation "Suleman & Saleem (2024)" in the original manuscript could not be independently verified and has been removed pending the author supplying full, verifiable bibliographic details (or an alternative, verifiable source making the same claim).

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The following publicly accessible post URLs correspond to Posts 1-7 analyzed in Section 5. Consistent with the ethical approach adopted in this study (Section 4.3), these links are retained for transparency and replicability; researchers reusing this dataset should independently re-verify current accessibility and platform terms of use before further analysis.

Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 1816-1836.