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Deciphering Hate Speech in Multimodal Pakistani Political Memes on X

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Abstract

In today's world, memes have emerged as an effective tool to disseminate political discourse, often presented in an entertaining way. However, they can also make society more divided by spreading hate speech. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore hate speech indicators in multimodal memes on X (formerly known as Twitter) for a time period of three months (Dec 2023-Feb 2024). The study was conducted in the context of the general elections 2024 in Pakistan. The analysis utilized a combination of the Fairclough model and the multimodal framework of critical discourse analysis to identify and analyze nine indicators of hate speech. These indicators comprised both established indicators, such as dehumanization, character assassination, and name-calling, as well as context-specific expressions of criticism directed at political parties and institutions such as the judiciary and the Election Commission of Pakistan, particularly in response to the allegations of electoral misconduct. The findings suggested that memes are not only a tool to disseminate humor and entertainment but also function as a way for people to show their dissatisfaction and express different opinions. As per critical discourse analysis, the selected memes reflected underlying political tensions and contested narratives of power that surfaced during the elections. Such representations may challenge dominant institutions and contribute to the expression of discontent within the sociopolitical environment of Pakistan.

Keywords: General Elections 2024, hate speech, memes, political discourse, X (formerly Twitter)

Introduction

The term "meme" was first invented by Richard Dawkins in his book The Selfish Gene) in 1976. The author attempted to explain it as a way of spreading cultural information (Rastogi & Kashyap, 2019). The term meme

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has been derived from the Greek word 'mimeme' which means 'to imitate'. Currently, social media users upload memes on various online forums (Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Tiktok) in the form of 'text only,' 'text and image,' 'videos,', and 'Gifs' (Baig et al., 2023).

Humor and satire are considered as the basic elements of a meme. For a meme to go viral, it must depict some creativity. A meme does not necessarily generate new ideas, rather it mixes different images, texts, and videos to create new ideas from the existing ones in an amusing and humorous way which is attractive to the audiences. Memes have come to play a crucial role in the prevailing political discourse (Fatima, 2020).

Social media is being used for political purposes and to communicate political messages across the globe. An important example in this regard was set by the US President Donald Trump. He used memetic expression to disseminate his slogan of "Keep America Great" in 2020. The memes related to this slogan helped him to secure the second-highest number of votes in US history. Trump, instead of using the direct strategy to demonize his opponents, used this alternative way to discredit them (Helferich, 2021).

The 2013 General Elections in Pakistan marked an increase in political rhetoric disseminated through social media. At that time, memes comically incorporating politicians and their expressions were developed. After the 2013 elections, with the surge of social media as a political tool, Pakistani society found a unique way to express their opinions which the traditional media lacked (Siddiqua, 2021). Since the No Confidence Motion in 2022, there has been a recognizable increase in the circulation of political memes in the country. These memes are regularly created and spread by the supporters of different political parties, especially those associated with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), and serve as a medium to express biased viewpoints and running commentary on progressing events (Curtis, 2024).

Social media memes have provided users with an effective tool to express their resentment with anonymity by using fake accounts, so they are not held accountable for their activities. This lack of accountability has led them to use offensive and hateful words and symbols to depict any individual or group. No political party or politician can escape from the effects of online hate. People can easily judge their actions and may spread such content quickly (Durrani & Naseer, 2021).

Rationale

The growing online hate speech through social media platforms is a serious concern, keeping in view the prevailing political instability in Pakistan. The researcher analyzed the hate speech in memes for the period when there was an interim government and different political parties were striving hard to achieve success in the General Elections of 2024. After the elections, the claims of vote rigging and political influence sparked discussions among people in online posts. This hate is not just found online; it also affects conversations in real life, which may increase political tensions in the society. The detection of such hatred, often masked in jokes and satire, is important for creating good ways to respond and encourage responsible communication online.

Statement of the Problem

Most memes created these days are full of hate content, often surrounded/sugarcoated by inside humor and parody. Therefore, the detailed identification and detection of such hatred is quite challenging. If this kind of communication is not dealt with appropriately, it can affect political discourse and increase sociopolitical tensions in the country. Therefore, it is imperative to identify, analyze, and inform policymakers about such hate speech indicators, so that they can enact powerful and effective laws to reduce hate speech before it possibly leads to polarization and public detriment.

Research Objectives

- To identify the types of hate speech indicators in multimodal political memes on X (formerly Twitter) in the context of the General Election 2024 in Pakistan.

- To analyze the implicit meanings of Pakistani multimodal political memes containing hate speech.

- To determine the context of the particular type of hatred in these memes.

Research Questions

- What type of hate speech indicators were prevalent in multimodal political memes on X (formerly Twitter) during the General Elections 2024 in Pakistan?

- What are the implicit meanings of Pakistani multimodal political memes containing hate speech?

- What is the context of the particular type of hatred expressed in these memes?

Significance of the Research

This research contributes toward detecting the type of hate speech propagated through memes in a humorous way, which may adversely impact societal values and possibly contribute to incitement or bitterness in public discourse. Hate speech is increasingly influencing various segments of the society, which may result in the development of negative perceptions among the populace. This type of negative attitude, behavior, and beliefs may lead to negative reactions and punitive actions by the general public.

Literature Review

The term 'meme' has been explored by various researchers but in the context of "Internet memes". It is described as a funny or interesting content that people share online. Some memes stay the same but others are changed by the users, taking different versions that might look quite different from the original. Shifman (2013) explained three dimensions of internet memes which are content (the message propagated through meme), form (the appearance of the message in the form of audio, image, text, or video), and the stance (the ideology or stance conveyed through the meme). Memetic evolution can also be examined through the structuration theory by Anthony Giddens, which explains how memes help shape social conversations while also being affected by cultural beliefs, traditions, and symbols. The concept of the 'duality of structure' is, therefore, applicable in this context (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014).

Along with the positive outcomes of memes, there are various drawbacks which include the dissemination of the elements of aggravation, anger, and resentment. People are symbolized with animals for their denigration and degradation. It can be argued that during political campaigns memes spread harmful ideas through pictures and words, which might polarize people politically (Karjo & Ng, 2018). Memes are based on contextualizing complex phenomena in a simple but comic way having multiple interpretations, making it hard to find and study the content that could be dangerous (Pramanick, et al., 2021).

Memes do not only serve the purpose of political communication but also the purpose of persuading the members of the society of certain viewpoints. The potential to persuade depends upon their timeliness and relevancy to the prevailing political circumstances (Laurent et al., 2021). Besides making people laugh, memes can affect how the public thinks. They can strengthen certain political positions, push away contrasting opinions, and help shape what people believe in (Javed et al., 2022).

Political memes might lead to polarized opinions when shared within 'echo chambers,' where individuals are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs. Conversely, when such memes are encountered by individuals with differing viewpoints, they might cause people to disagree or argue with each other (Sultana & Khalid, 2023). Political narratives conveyed through memes shape the public's perception during election campaigns and also serve a disruptive function by questioning how politicians act and what they are like, which could change how the public thinks about them and how voters see them (Adegoju & Oyebode, 2015). Exposure to political meme content has been associated with increased political participation, opinion formation, and expression, and may also invoke strong feelings of frustration or dislike towards particular politicians or political parties. These outcomes underscore the role of political memes in influencing perceptions and behaviors that contribute to broader political discourse (Halversen & Weeks, 2023).

Several studies have examined how memes are used in Pakistani politics, indicating their prospective effect in creating and molding the public's insights into political happenings. However, there remains a research gap comprising the detailed identification and systematic categorization of hate speech in memes specifically propagated during the electoral campaigns in Pakistan, particularly in the General Elections of 2024. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing both the language and the visuals in selected memes created during this period to explore the possible cases of hate speech embedded within the content shared through them.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Fairclough model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the textual content of memes. The aim is to analyze the hidden meanings within memes in order to explore the potential indicators

of hate speech embedded in humorous and satirical political content. For this purpose, by examining various linguistic elements, the current study investigates how markers of hate speech may be communicated through text with respect to their sociopolitical settings and correlated power dynamics. The theoretical base aligns with the objective of analyzing fun-looking memes that might convey hidden feelings of unfairness or anger. The study contributes to the identification of subtle ways of showing dislike that may be shared through memes by analyzing their linguistic features, such as metaphors, connotations, word choices, comparisons, relations, and intertextualities. It also examines the sociopolitical tensions, power dynamics, and institutional criticism that surfaced during the election period.

In addition to the Fairclough model of CDA, Multimodal Discourse Analysis or MDA (2007) is employed to examine memes that contain both textual and visual elements. This approach allows to examine pictures for objects, facial expressions, people and what they are doing in order to understand how messages are better shared in visual memes. MDA also assists the researchers in exploring the relationship between textual and visual elements and how their combination helps to create and share meaning.

A qualitative approach is employed, using CDA as the prime conceptual framework. In social sciences, the study of language and communication is important to   understand discourse in its   social and political setting. Scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Paul Chilton, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak have contributed immensely to the progress of CDA (Atalay, 2015). Therefore, Fairclough model and multimodal CDA would provide a holistic analysis of memes as a communicative tool to address possible societal and political polarization and power struggles in the context of the General Elections of 2024 in Pakistan.

Method

Data Collection

The population of this research comprises political memes selected from X (formerly Twitter) that include both textual and visual components. The time frame for data collection was three months (December 2023 to February 2024). This time period was selected premeditatedly due to its juxtaposition to the General Elections in Pakistan, held on 8th February

2024, a time marked by increased political activity and noticeable public participation on digital media. This period was also characterized by increased political expression, which included the widespread sharing of political memes. Hence, this research aims to explore the existence of controversial and enmity-driven themes that may have been disseminated during the above period.

For retrieving memes, hashtags and X (Twitter) trends related to politicians, political parties, and the political situation of Pakistan, specifically in the context of General Elections 2024, were explored manually on a regular basis. It was also observed that the content was not always relevant to its hashtag as users frequently posted in compliance with contemporary trends to enhance their content's visibility. Therefore, most of the explored content was disguised under popular hashtags.

Sampling

Political memes were selected using the purposive sampling technique (non-probability sampling). The memes exhibiting the attributes of hate speech were selected intentionally, so that hate speech indicators could be focused specifically along with their meanings. After collecting the data on memes, the sample was sorted by employing systematic random sampling while using the exclusion criteria. Skip interval was used to select a reasonable number of memes to analyze their content, as well as to initiate discussion and useful results. A sample of 78 memes was selected out of 312 memes by using the skip interval of 4. Memes under each category are analyzed, whereas 9 memes with images are discussed in detail.

Categorization Scheme

For textual analysis, various elements under the umbrella of the Fairclough model were observed, such as metaphors, comparisons, intertextualities, relations, connotations, and word choices. For visual analysis under Multimodal CDA, categories such as individuals, objects, background, style/pose/expressions, and activities are helpful. A systematic coding of the indicators of hate speech was used to detect the types of hate speech prevalent in memes. A deductive approach was used to develop a categorization scheme for a detailed analysis of hate speech, where most of the indicators were conventional, while a few were context-based and retrieved from the data.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability and validity of the indicators of hate speech, a multi-coder approach was employed by assigning various coders to check the categories developed for the study. Reliable and consistent results were produced through the testing of multiple coders which ensured the validity of the findings.

Result

Through a detailed analysis of textual and visual elements, hate speech indicators were explored.

Dehumanization

Dehumanization is the act of designating people as less than human beings and is mostly applied to politicians, as well as their supporters, to demean them (Akbar & Safdar, 2023). It includes symbolizing politicians with various animals including dogs, donkeys, and pigs or other disgusting things such as trash or poop.

Figure 1
Depicts the use of dehumanizing imagery.

In the above meme (Figure 1), a donkey is illustrated as standing in front of the closed central office of PTI. The current condition of Imran Khan is symbolically represented with a donkey to depict his perceived stubbornness, while the closed party office metaphorically represents possible challenges and his political stature in the then upcoming 2024 elections. In the textual analysis, the caption 'successful journey' is likely used sarcastically to depict the legal, political, and electoral challenges faced by him. This meme refers to the political instance when before elections Imran Khan was jailed and disqualified by ECP with reference to the 'Toshakhana case' (Bilal, 2023).

Moreover, decisions by the judiciary in the context of elections are symbolized with poop. Such an analogy is used as a metaphor for perceived 'corruption' and 'moral injustice,' reflecting public's uncertainty towards rightfulness and neutrality in the justice system. Furthermore, drawing the relationship of such symbols with institutions suggests their perceived influence on the justice system. The meme under discussion possibly questions the perceived interference and influence exerted by external powers on the Chief Justice, referring to the revocation of the lifetime qualification of many politicians, especially Nawaz Sharif (Bhatti, 2024). The depiction of politicians and institutions' bigwigs with animals and other disgusting stuff suggests that it is the public's popular way of critique, where they manifest the perceived imbalance in power and disillusionment with political figures and parties.

Criticism

Criticism is defined as expressing disapproval based on someone's perceived demerits or debility. Social media spheres are commonly used to convey the critique of political figures and political parties based on their performance, rhetoric, and ideology (Shafiq, 2021).

Memes in this category depict humorous as well as sarcastic criticism of the motives and rhetorical statements of the politicians. Most memes depict humorous and taunting criticism of the slogans of Imran Khan and his party, such as 'kia hum koi Ghulam hain' (are we slaves?), which is his popular slogan. In this regard, the performance of PTI during their previous tenure (2018-2022) was questioned by their opponents, particularly based on the alleged corruption cases of Imran Khan (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Performance-based critique during an electoral campaign.

The meme, through visual illustration, depicts a fictional conversation between an individual and a PTI member who is going to contest for the then upcoming elections. This meme employs satire to question the decisions of people contesting under a leadership already facing governance challenges, intraparty concerns, and corruption allegations. The textual analysis conveys a warning to PTI members to refrain from contesting elections, as people seem to be discontented with the party's performance and this may lead to defeat due to the backlash from the public. Such memes containing political criticism might affect the public's discourse and perceptions, particularly regarding elections.

Name-Calling

Name-calling is a hate speech category that refers to assigning derogatory titles or nicknames based on certain stereotypical, behavioral, and physical traits of the person (Nendauni, 2020).

In the Pakistani context, the political discourse in terms of memes often incorporates assigning derogatory nicknames to the opponents, such as the supporters of PTI are mocked as 'Youthia,', those of PML(N) as 'Patwari,' whereas PPP (Pakistan People's Party) supporters are labelled as 'Jiyala,'

for their perceived and biased support of their respective political parties (Paracha, 2011). Memes are used to address the supporters of political parties by assigning them derogatory nicknames in order to criticize them for their affiliation. As illustrated in Figure 3, a person is symbolized as 'The Economist,' whereas exploding fire is visually presented as a supporter of PPP, PML(N), and the establishment, which are given derogatory nicknames of 'Patwari,' 'Jiyala,' and 'Faujeets'. 'The Economist', a British weekly magazine, is reflected as causing distress to the supporters of other political parties through their its published article written by Imran Khan on 4th Jan 2024 regarding his perspective on the General Elections 2024. This article was all about Khan's concerns about the then upcoming elections, based on the 'No Confidence Motion' in 2022. After the publication of the article, it was reposted multiple times by 'The Economist' on their official X (formerly Twitter) account, suggesting their perceived alignment with the statements of Imran Khan. On this account, many memes humorously critiqued the magazine as 'Youthia' for repeatedly posting and supporting the narrative of PTI again and again (Mehtab, 2024).

Figure 3

Pejorative labelling of political entities.

Not only political parties but politicians and heads of institutions are often subjected to name- calling based on certain behaviors and

associations, such as Shahbaz Sharif is sometimes called as 'Cherry Blossom' for his perceived compliance with national institutions, thus earning him the reputation of being an opportunist. This type of name-calling also questions the leadership style of the politicians.

Moreover, designating Justice Qazi Faez Isa as 'Nawaz Sharif of the lawyer's community' reflects perceived similarities among them, such as possible political bigotry, impartiality, and misconduct. This type of discourse not only questions the credibility of the justice system but also reflects the public's mistrust of both legal and political systems of Pakistan, which may embed further polarization in the society.

Character Assassination

Character assassination can be defined as a conscious and intentional attempt to malign the reputation of an individual or group. It is a propaganda technique that may cause serious damage to one's name and renown (Samoilenko, 2017). It can be based on one's personal life, sexism, gender, social, moral, or financial matters.

There are many instances where the private lives of politicians are discussed negatively instead of debating their official positions, such as during the elections. For example, Imran Khan was portrayed as immoral on social and moral grounds. His alleged case of having an illegal marriage with his wife Bushra Bibi was publicly discussed. Moreover, he was also accused by his opponents of encouraging young girls to attend his rallies. Similarly, Maryam Nawaz's personal life with her husband was also discussed humorously.

Similarly, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, a leader of PPP (Pakistan People's Party), is often mocked humorously about his speaking style and actions. As illustrated in Figure 4, he is compared with female politician Maha Bukhari who contested in the General Elections of 2024 and became popular during her election campaign with her tagline 'Dada ki Poti'. Bilawal is compared with her using the derogatory punch line 'Nana ki nawasi'. The meme conveys gendered humor, since he is suggested to have female characteristics, expressed through his gestures and actions. His leadership attributes are undermined through such humor. Due to feminine characteristics, he is presumed to lack leadership qualities. Such discourse reflects gender biases and reinforces gender stereotypes in terms of leadership and masculinity.

Figure 4

Character critique through gender-coded visual representation.

Furthermore, female politicians often have to go through character assassination based on their gender, especially on social media. In the context of the General Elections 2024, many memes surfaced on X (formerly Twitter) amid Maryam Nawaz's oath taking ceremony as Chief Minister of Punjab. Her edited pictures went viral on social media in inappropriate poses, through such memes the credibility of female politicians is undermined as they are accused of not being worthy of their success and position. Such memes reflect implicit gender bias and discriminatory attitudes based on sex, which attempt to discredit their merits and the ability to govern by leveraging false assumptions and associations against them, rather than discussing their professional capabilities.

Deterrent to National and International Peace and Security

The role of politicians and institutions is often subjected to criticism based on their stance and attitude towards internal and external peace and security matters (Akbar & Safdar, 2023). In the majority of memes, politicians and institutions are depicted as self-centered, instead of thinking about the overall welfare of the country.

Figure 5

Portrays politicians as self-interested and disconnected from national priorities.

In the context of elections, numerous memes expressed public doubt concerning supposed financial wrongdoing by individuals associated with different political groups. They were often designated as self-centered people showing no concern with the respect and integrity of their country. As illustrated in Figure 5, a picture of the Sharif brothers with Maryam Nawaz is used with the caption 'hum na baaz ayain gy corruption se, izzat jayegi aur kia ho ga,' which is a parody of the song used by PTI as their slogan during election days 'hum na baaz ayaingy mohabbat se, jaan jay gi aur kia ho ga'. Through this meme, politicians were humorously mocked as allegedly financially corrupt.

Whereas, another meme compares the life and assets of Nawaz Sharif in the past and present, showing how his lifestyle appears to have changed significantly and suggesting, through satire, that his current wealth stems from corruption. Although presented in a humorous way, these portrayals enhance an emerging storyline of skepticism towards political leaders. Furthermore, such narratives can lead to increased polarization within the country and also generate worries about the credibility of institutions globally, which could hinder both national and international efforts for peace and security.

An ongoing struggle between different institutions and political leadership is seen through memes, where they are influenced by external forces or international powers. Visuals in the memes not only critique and challenge the role of the national institutions and political parties but also depict the public's discontentment with their credibility and interests.

Portrayal and Response to the Government Institutions

Memes under this category depict the public's intense reaction towards the decisions and motives of the government and institutions. Figure 6 shows children with laughing faces holding a banner which says that their school results should also be prepared by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), suggesting that they could also get good results even after a bad performance. In this meme, the laughing faces of the children suggest ridiculing the ECP regarding their management of the electoral process.

Figure 6

Displays public humor toward electoral institutions after the 2024 elections.

Concerns related to fairness in the General Elections of 2024 were broadly discussed through memes, particularly by PTI supporters who complained about the manipulation of election results, as the party was contesting through independent candidates due to the lack of an electoral symbol. A large number of discrepancies were reported by the media regarding the vote count based on Form 45 provided by the presiding officers, as well as Form 47 which was a consolidated document provided

afterwards (Mehboob, 2024). Therefore, the results took many days to be compiled and announced by ECP. In several cases, candidates who won based on form 45 lost based on form 47. Thus, the public showed their disgruntlement towards the irregularities of ECP and other institutions involved in the electoral process through memes.

Furthermore, there were many memes with the hashtag #MandateThieves denouncing institutions and political parties by holding them responsible of alleged rigging. There are several memes included in the sample where various visuals and cues regarding national institutions are used metaphorically to emphasize their perceived authority, power, and influence on national affairs.

Mocking the Concepts/Events/People

Memes are used to humorously critique politicians and institutions for their decisions and actions. Memes in the sample suggest how they were targeted based on certain past events, such as the dissatisfaction of PTI supporters is portrayed sarcastically through memes based on the 9th May incident, when their political party leader was arrested. Whereas, in response, PTI supporters also criticized the leadership of other parties in the context of other events.

Figure 7
Event-driven satire of a political figure and their party.

Figure 7 presents Maryam Nawaz comically. The meme points towards an incident that happened on 30th October 2023, when Caretaker Prime

Minister Anwaar ul Haq Kakar visited Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) to meet its faculty and students. During this meetup, students raised challenging queries regarding delayed elections, the economic situation of the country, and also inquired about his late arrival (The Nation, 2023). Clips of conversations between students and caretaker PM went viral on social media, while supporters of PTI used these clips to critique their opponents humorously. This meme seems to reflect Maryam Nawaz's assumed concerns regarding the outcomes of elections, particularly from the youth, especially students. Such memes appear to question her public trust and leadership influence.

Unethical Practices

Using abusive and derogatory language and showing disregard through physical appearance or actions in the memes towards the politicians has become a normal practice on social media in the context of Pakistani political discourse. It is also observed that disrespectful words are often used to target politicians in the memes along with inappropriate images.

In many memes, Maryam Nawaz is portrayed in an unassertive positions along with heads of institutions and politicians which connotes the situation where politicians are perceived to be allegedly gaining political strength by aligning with the goals of powerful entities.

Figure 8
Visual depiction of inappropriate language among political parties.

In another meme (Figure 8), a picture of a laptop with the display image of Imran Khan is shown with a caption attributed to Shahbaz Sharif, who ran a campaign of allotting laptops to youth on the basis of merit during his previous government. The caption reads, "My purpose was to give laptops to youth, now it's up to them whether they put their picture on the display or of their sister's boyfriend." In visual analysis, the depiction of Imran Khan on the laptop serves as a metaphor indicating a change in youth backing from PML(N) to PTI. This understanding may represent a sense of disloyalty or a political shift among younger voters, despite the efforts by Shahbaz Sharif to gain youth support through such initiatives. The wording in the caption might be perceived as holding an implicit negative connotation, especially considering the cultural context in Pakistan, where mentions of female relatives are frequently regarded as unsuitable or disrespectful in public discussions. The term 'sister's boyfriend' could suggest a mocking or critical tone regarding both Imran Khan and his followers. Nonetheless, such interpretations depend on the specific context and may differ according to the observer's political and cultural perspective.

Prejudice or Social Discrimination

Prejudice is a broad terminology that can encapsulate various types of hate speech detectors, depending on the content. Hate speech, in terms of prejudice, can be disseminated through online forums in politics, religion, race, or ethnicity, which suggests normative postulation of how things should be per a particular culture, race, or religion (Shafiq, 2021).

There are many memes where the aspects of culture and ethnicity, as well as patriotism and intellectualism, have been used to uplift some politicians and to subvert others, based on certain stereotypical characteristics. As illustrated in Figure 9, Imran Khan is portrayed in an assertive position with the caption 'My full name is Imran Ahmad Khan Niazi and people call me the father of the system'. Here, pride is expressed both visually and textually, since mentioning the full name of the politician accompanied with body language has connotations of pride and bravery asserted through his tribe and culture. It also metaphorically explains his perceived influence and authority in the political sphere. The term 'father of the system' metaphorically depicts his perceived domination and ascendency, as the term 'father' is used here in the sense of influence, authority, and protection. Thus, this meme reinforces stereotypes based on cultural supremacy.

The supporters of PTI disseminated memes to create a sense of supremacy for their leader, as well as demeaning others and assigning them as harmful for the country. In another meme, where a picture of Nawaz Sharif is placed on the tobacco packet with the label 'he is injurious to health'. The meme reflects the public's, particularly the youth's, dissatisfaction with the political legacy of Nawaz Sharif in a humorous and satirical way. It intends to echo broader sentiments of disillusionment, suggesting him as a symbolic scapegoat for the country's social, political, and economic issues.

Figure 9

Illustrates a symbolic portrayal of political dominance over rivals.

Discussion

The research explores the various types of hate speech indicators prevalent in political memes during General Elections 2024 in Pakistan. The analysis revealed nine indicators. The observed meme content alleged politicians and national institutions, such as judiciary and ECP, as involved in anti-state activities and posing threat to democracy.

Moreover, netizens spread their exasperation and displeasure toward institutions, particularly regarding their decisions related to politicians and the country in the context of General Elections 2024. Therefore, the study concludes that along with the traditional hate speech indicators, such as dehumanization, character assassination, and name-calling, (Papcunová, et al., 2021) the people of Pakistan utilized this platform to express institutional critique. This is a novel, evolving, and contemporary type of political discourse through social media.

Inflamed and edited content towards national institutions and politicians is an intentional attempt to delegitimize the power of such institutions. This also aligns with the CDA principle which emphasizes the relationship between power and discourse (Fairclough, 2013).

Linguistic discourse has the power to undermine the authority which, in this case, strives to affect public trust, contributing not only towards polarization in the society but also reinforcing the sense of rebellion in the public.

In analyzing the implicit meanings engrained within Pakistani political memes containing hate speech, visual illustrations of politicians and institutions are a kind of symbolic attack towards them. Memes are usually formulated in an implicit way as various metaphors, comparisons, relations, connotations, and intertextualities are used to deliver the context of the meme using humor and sarcasm. It purely depends on the audience how they perceive. This also coincides with CDA approach suggesting how discourse is shaped by the society and vice versa (Fairclough, 1992).

The understanding of a meme's meaning is greatly dependent on prior knowledge and culture; the onlooker will only understand the meaning behind the meme if they are part of a particular society or culture and aware of the political context or event described through the meme. This also emphasizes how politicians are discursively framed through cultural symbolism, thus subtly inoculating hatred in the society without facing the risk of backlash. This analysis also aligns with (Shifman, 2013) the idea of meme culture; how audiences drive meanings from memes through their cultural contexts. Their perception about memes majorly depends on their prior knowledge of politics, culture, and the society. This is why memes creators take advantage to embed hate content disguised in humor.

In determining the context of a particular type of hatred in Pakistani political memes, the study observed that some memes use words to deliver hidden meanings, while other pointed towards certain events, contexts, or scenarios. Some memes were primarily used to disseminate hatred through baseless allegations, criticism, and manipulations of political ideologies during the election period.

Many political events/incidents unravel before and during elections, but only a few events were prominent in eliciting hatred, mistrust, and dissatisfaction among the general public, which led to the dispersion of immense memes. Distinguished among these was the arrival of Nawaz Sharif from London after four years of self-exile and the removal of corruption cases against him. In addition, judicial verdicts regarding cases on Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi, particularly in the 'Toshakhana case,' 'Iddah case,' as well as the 9th May 2023 incident where PTI members and supporters were accused of harming military buildings were more prominent. The ECP and the establishment was targeted for allegedly creating hurdles for PTI in the context of elections. Alleged delay in election results, as well as manipulation and rigging, resulted in the surge of memes on X (formerly Twitter) against the ECP and other institutions.

The study also observed that some memes lacked a clear and evident connection, but they were disseminated in response to major events and happenings. Such type of combative and exploitative content, often delivered through a sarcastic and humorous expression, supports CDA's contention about discourse that how discourse has the ability to disempower political organizations. According to Wodak (2015), political discourse is often disseminated through indirect memes to construct desired ideologies and narratives.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that memes are not only humorous and entertaining pieces of political communication but also serve as a potent tool for changing the power dynamics in social and political setups. Through linguistic elements, hate speech is inoculated subtly in public discourse wearing the mask of derogatory titles, sarcasm, and humor, whereas bold visuals and inflammatory actions expand negative perceptions in the society.

As per the principles of CDA, it is clear that memes circulated during elections in Pakistan suggest broader power struggles between political parties intending to take control of the country after elections. Hate speech in memes further disempowered the already marginalized or less popular political parties and politicians, whereas established power structures such as judiciary and ECP etc., were undermined based on their alleged actions and decisions. The platform of X (formerly Twitter) was used extensively in this regard by exercising the power of memes in the disguise of humor and sarcasm.

Finally, the study suggests the gradual decline of the public's trust, reinforcing divisions, and polarization towards the democratic process. Memes, seemingly a subtle and humorous tool depict the public's increasing annoyance and disillusionment towards politicians and institutions, which may intensify the succeeding outcomes of the 2024 elections in Pakistan.

Recommendations

- Memes are a powerful type of media. When propagated through a platform like X (formerly Twitter), they can reach millions of people. Therefore, they should be used to convey constructive ideas and perceptions, rather than stimulating harmful ideologies.

- As the current study concludes, various types of hate speech detectors were found to be present in memes; therefore, the state should take action to formulate certain laws and observe constraints on the content using AI-based systems through cultural and ethnic detectors.

- There should be educational and awareness campaigns regarding the responsible use of social media to counter offensive and derogatory content in communication.

- There should not be a complete ban on the use and access to social media platforms particularly X (formerly Twitter) because it restricts people's right to information. Rather, there should be a proper legal framework to restrict and impose penalties on those involved in posting threats and incitement to violence in the society.

- Future research can inspect this topic by examining the mindset of meme producers, understanding the effect of memes on the mindset of consumers, the role of politicians and political parties in cultivating

hatred, as well as other factors such as misinformation/disinformation through memes.

Limitations

X (formerly Twitter) was banned in Pakistan on 17th February 2024. This ban posed difficulty for the researcher to collect the sample of memes and possibly decreased the frequency of memes after the election. Therefore, to overcome this hurdle, VPN (Virtual Private Network) was used by the researcher to collect the sample.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of the study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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