Memetic Warfare: Case Study of Memes in Pakistani Social Media during February 2019

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Abstract

Memes are inherently text-pictures, as visuals are more receptible to a larger audience than the written text. Memes are being favorably used in the digital media, in the garb of pun and fun to bring across the inherently disturbing message. This has resulted in memetic warfare that has rapidly taken its root on social networking sites (SNS) around the globe. They serve a specific purpose that includes effective communication, displays strong cultural affinities and provoke a strong reaction among audience. The current study is based on the communicative yet viral and spreadable media attributes of memes. In recent years, with the immense popularity of SNS in Pakistan and India, it is but natural to use and create memes on the escalating political and military tensions between the two countries. The whole process is considered a battle to gain audiences' attention disregarding the protocol. This study analyses the memes that appear in Pakistani sites in the month of February 2019 due to increasing military tensions between the two countries. Almost all the memes reflect a cultural background based on cognition of the audiences of digital culture. For an outsider some of these memes will not make any sense as they belong to a specific culture and history. Multi-modal Critical Discourse Analysis is used to examine the corpus of memes that appeared on Twitter and Facebook in February 2019 in Pakistan. The multimodal CDA highlights the presentation, intensification, identification and implementation of memes.

Keywords: cultural affinity, digital culture, memes, modal critical discourse analysis, social networking sites

1.   Introduction

Memes have been categorized as text-pictures fully adhering to a strong visual affinity that are shown by the current generation. The memes are more relatable to this generation because the typical political news is 'boring', moreover memes have positive cognitive effects. As observed by Velikovsky, 2014, a meme can be a combination of "an idea, process or product", and the effective communication takes place based, cultural and cognitive details. Such intricate cognitive details are responsible for having a better understanding of visuals than the

text; therefore, memes have become immensely popular, globally. Memes have become a salient feature of digital culture.

This paper aims to study a group of viral memes on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter during the second week of February in 2019 when the military tension between Pakistan and India escalated to such an extent that the forces were posted at the borders and the airspace was restricted on both sides of the border. This corpus presents an interesting ground of study as these memes present cultural information of a mindset and behaviors of a target group. Both the countries share a cultural and geographical history therefore the entertainment provided by these visuals has cultural roots. Thus, making these memes "contagious" or viral and the conditions to make these memes replicate effectively, is done through social networking sites (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

2   Literature review

As has been shown by studies; visuals or memes in our case are always coded. Different people interpret the memes differently. The interpretation is dependent on their historic associations and is done implicitly without any conscious effort. The same principle is applied to the societies as a whole because collectively they react to certain semiotic cues while decoding the memes. (van Leeuwen, T. 2004).

Due to globalization, we, as humans have blurred the line between entertainment and politics, resulting in memes becoming a source of fun within political or military domains and in this study the military campaigns. Such political interests inherently reflect the cultural values of the social groups (Hall 1993).

The effective communications of messages through memes require contextual understanding of the image. Such contexts are not understandable to the ones who are not familiar with the historical or cultural background of Pakistan and India. This understanding is also based on "power differences" within the social structures. The representative cues in the images help the audience to choose plausible explanations. Like a painting, memes are thus open to many interpretations. It is up to the creators to carefully play with the cognitive skills of their audience. (Hodge, R. and Kress, G. 1988).

The composition of image and text in meme shows the information, salience and framing of the message that is put forth.

Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, (2014, p. 152), contended by defining memes as visual representations of an idea with "cultural instructions'' that tend to go 'viral' due to the brevity and conciseness of the message.

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The most effective platforms in the new media are considered social networking sites (SNS) that mostly operate on the grounds laid by 'Uses and Gratification Theory.' SNS offers gratification in cognitive, psychological and social needs (Dunne et al., 2010).

2.1 Objective
a)   To understand the multi-layered meanings presented in memes
b)   To comprehend the digital cultural aspect of memes

2.2 Methodology

a) In this study, a corpus of 30 memes from 13th February to 17th February is chosen with a text and specific images. The current paper has discussed the selected 4 memes featured on 15th February 2019. The selection was done from the popular pages/profiles on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; each with 1 million-plus followers. The analysis is done in its multimodality through Critical Discourse Analysis. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis MCDA helps in understanding the complex, multi-layered and intertextual meanings of a meme (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016, p. 27).

b) Every single image/meme is made up of a text and an image with a very strong reference to some cultural or cognitive elements. Multimodality only completes when the text and the image are presented together. The combined meanings create the desired implications. This helps the audience to make "inferential hypotheses" in comprehending the overall meaning of the meme. As is the case in this study, the memes are incomprehensible to those audiences who lack the necessary background knowledge of important events or political issues (Kardaş, 2012, p. 208; El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010, p. 197).

As the memes are visual in nature and communicate the message, therefore the current study employs critical discourse analysis in its multi-modality, because MCDA:

●   Inherently interdisciplinary
●   Uses cultural and historical context of the image
●   Prioritize the language also but in its social context
●   Analyzes the groups and their dynamics
●   Linguistic and nonlinguistic features are not just analyzed randomly
●   Focuses on the multiplicity and explanation/interpretation of written texts and non-linguistic elements

c) Here, each meme is scrutinized using non linguistic features of MCDA, where the text in the meme is part of a non-linguistic feature. Different levels of multimodality include visual language, narrative contextuality are employed for analysis.

2.3 Research Framework
Following is the outline/questions based on MCDA, to analyze the discourse in the memes:

a)	*Rendition as Presentation*	What idea/information is shown in the meme and how do we know about this? How is this idea/information presented? What does this meme signify at this point of time and space for a specific social group? Is the Presentation implicit or explicit? (it can predict the role of the actor) Is the presentation repetitive or innovative? What are the cultural or stereotypical factors involved if the meme is presented respectively? Is there any metaphorical presentation?
b)	*Rendition as Intensification*	Intensification of a meme is based on the emotional aspect. Does the perception of the meme create distance/closeness with the image to intensify the message? What colors or angles are used for intensification?
c)	*Rendition as Identification*	What information do we get about the context within which it gets viral? What are the assumptions made about knowledge and truth within a particular context? Does it identify with the cultural and historical background of the reader (cognition).
d)	*Rendition as Implementation*	What repetitive and identifiable factors help in conditioning the audience in implementing a certain ideology? What are the deeper/larger themes and ideas shown in the image? What do these themes/ideas tell us about different social groups?

2.4 Analysis

Figure 1

Figure 1 Translation: "Sir Neighbors are busy in PSL. Our threat of war is not taken seriously."

a)   *Rendition as Presentation:* The image shows Prime Minister Modi of India with his aide. It has a metaphorical presentation by mentioning that the neighbor, that is, Pakistan, is not taking the war-threat seriously. The information is conveyed in a light-hearted tone reflecting that the opponents are paying more attention to the game of cricket than real war. This meme signifies for Pakistanis a certain collective mindset. As a social group, war cannot have that seriousness as PSL (Pakistan Super League). Thus, implicitly alluding to the basic cultural responses when it comes to the military tension between the two countries.

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b)   *Rendition as Intensification:* The message in the meme is intensified by the positioning of the main characters. The image chosen for the sarcasm shows the Indian Prime Minister with his aid, while whispering something in the PM's ear. The proximity, seriousness and political rank of the actors also contribute to the intensification of the message. The written text is sarcastic and trivial in nature in comparison to the image presented.

c)   *Rendition as Identification*: The meme has cognitive and cultural identification for the audience. As the people of both the countries have been part of the wars and cross border military tensions, therefore, it can be safely assumed that the Generation Z (creator of such memes) have learnt to tone down the seriousness of the national matters. The audience can easily identify and create associations with the image and text as it is part of their own culture and history.

d)   *Rendition as Implementation*: The general implication of meme is to trivialize the war threats. Both the countries have nuclear capabilities; therefore, it is a common observation that it is somewhat difficult to get into a real war. But such statements from the political and military leadership imply how the matters are perceived by the general public and leadership.

Figure 2:

PAKISTANIS waiting for indian attack/War

e) *Rendition as Presentation:* Figure 2, meme shows Mr Beans waiting in different frames. Metaphorically these different waiting postures complement the text which presents the issue by saying that Pakistanis have been waiting for the war to happen in reality. Again the information is conveyed in a light-hearted tone reflecting that the Pakistani side is ready for the attack. This meme signifies that for Pakistanis, as a social group, war cannot have that seriousness as PSL. This meme also alludes to the combined cultural/social response of Pakistanis when it comes to military tensions.

f) *Rendition as Intensification:* The position of the main characters is close to the audience, presented in natural colors. This creates a sense of intensification in the

minds of the audience as being close to the actors. This also creates an emotional link. In this case, the seriousness of the actors is in direct contrast with the text, creating humor and reflecting on the casual approach of the audience towards the war threat.

In figure 2, the iconic comic character Mr. Beans is presented in four different frames at an eye-level and close to the audience. Such closeness creates a sense of intensification in the minds of the audience as being part of the waiting game. The emotional link is based on humor. The sarcastic statement and the demeanor of Mr. Beans complement each other. Again, it reflects on the casual approach of the audience towards the war threat.

c)   *Rendition as Identification*: The Identification aspect of the meme shows that the context of war has become a source of humor for this social group owing to the repeated military tensions across the border. Cultural and historical backgrounds are immediately identified by the recipients.

d)   *Rendition as Implementation*: Repeated occurrences of these across the border follies between the two governments have rendered such threats as a source of fun for the relevant social groups. The deeper ideology is reflective of how the governments have succeeded in creating a mindset of target groups.
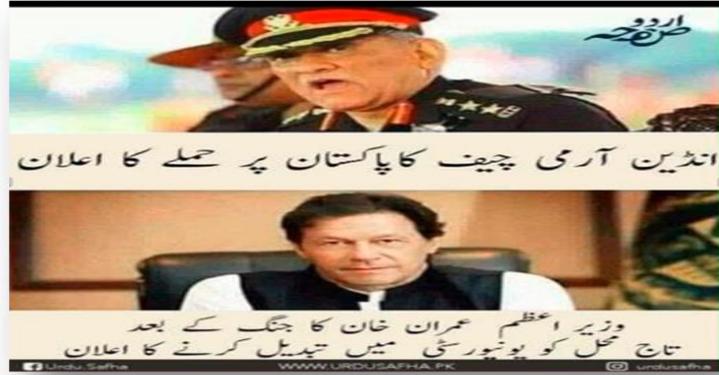
Figure 3:

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Figure 3 Translation: (Line 1 of Text) "Indian Army Chief has announced to attack Pakistan.

(Line 2 of Text) PM Pakistan has announced that Taj Mahal will be converted into a university after the war."

a) *Rendition as Presentation*: This meme also brings out the contextual implications, which are presented in a humorous way. When PM Pakistan held the office, he announced plans to convert major government buildings into universities. Here, creating a pun on his announcements, the response texts say that Pakistan will convert Taj Mahal into a university. There are two implications in the given texts. One, these war threats and military tensions escalations have become a routine that these are not taken seriously, at least on SNS platforms and secondly, it is already understood who will win the war. This meme also creates the in-group and out-group scenario.

b) *Rendition as Intensification*: This meme plays well with the national emotions of the public. Such exchange of dialogues between the leadership of these two countries is used, to create hype and sensationalism. The real pictures of political leaders from Pakistan and military leadership from India create a realistic impact thus building closeness to the audience. The textual message is intensified with the emotional relevance to the audience.

c) *Rendition as Identification*: First line of text is the real time message from the Indian military leadership while the second line from PM of Pakistan creates sarcasm as he was known to announce converting many government spaces into educational institutes. So, the real time context and historical allusion develops identification for the audience.

d) *Rendition as Implementation*: The repetition of the Indian leadership's statements is implementing a specific ideology among the audience. The deeper historical allusions are brought to the surface which are relevant to the local audience.

Figure 4:

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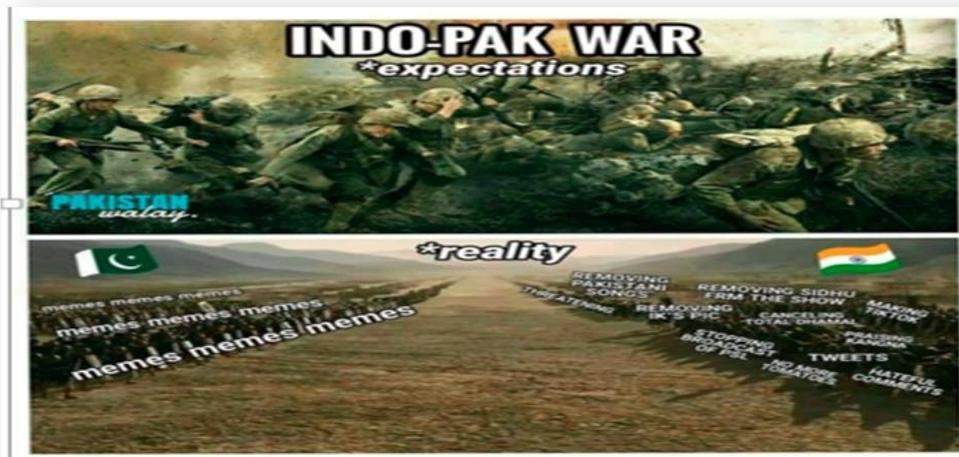
a)   *Rendition as Presentation:* This meme is one of the best examples of how both sides of the nation react towards war threats. It nicely sums up the whole concept of memetic warfare. The dramatic warfare-effect is created here, showing how both the countries enjoy movies. Both the film industries are responsible for making many war-based movies to play with 'patriotic emotions' of the public. So, this meme has taken the movie goers interest to social media. The movie-affect signifies the interests and emotions of the target social group. The presentation is implicit but having glaringly explicit meanings because it echoes the emotional responses of the audience.

b)   *Rendition as Intensification*: The message is intensified through the emotional closeness

to the audience. Although the image does not show any single clear face or a clear actor, the message is intensified by sending an appeal to the cognition of the audience.

c)   *Rendition as Identification*: Historically, culturally and emotionally, this meme resonates with the audience as they identify the emotional responses to it.

d)   *Rendition as Implementation*: Again, it is identifying cultural responses, implementing a certain ideology. The deeper meaning is the love of drama and movies by the general audience.

2.5 Discussion

In modern digital culture, memes serve as carriers for the delivery of political identities of social groups. At first sight, they might seem to be the instances of fun and entertainment but inherently they have strong ideological narratives.

The memes used in this study clearly show how a single image can store cultural and historical background and its implications for the in-group (van Dijk, 1985). Every image

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successfully created the in-group and out-group scenario. Such casual reflections accentuate the cultural and social affiliations and cognitive understandings of the region.

Despite having the history of fighting wars with each other, the social groups seem to have grown mature in responding to such deadly threats. These social responses might have developed due to the repetitive presentations of the same issues with zero results.

The memes in the study effectively influence individual's perception and judgment, thus, shaping public opinion in the long run. Information in the garb of memes can easily shape public opinion and ideology.

3   Conclusion

This adaptation of humorous ambiguity offers a mediated ground for an understanding among different social groups. Memes also serve the purpose of creating an interest especially when the social networking sites are full of 'cute' images and news about celebrities. Memes have created a space for their individualistic presence related to serious occurrences around us. Wit, flair and visual skills make memes more understandable by masses. Therefore, this study is just a first step in understanding the cultural basis of memes, a comparative study and content analysis will be done at a later stage, on the appearances of memes on the SNS platforms of both the countries.

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