



Memes as Tools of Resistance, Distraction, and Tribalism: A Sociological Analysis of Digital Culture in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

With an emphasis on Pakistan's digital scene, this study investigates the sociological relevance of memes as instruments of opposition, diversion, and tribalism. Using memetic theory and digital sociology, it examines how internet memes are employed to negotiate political expression, cultural identity, and emotional coping by Pakistani youth drawing on primary data and combining it with current research. This study, using a qualitative content analysis of 30 viral memes and a small-scale survey of 100 college students, finds patterns about political dissent, generational satire, and online nationalism. In repressive circumstances, memes are shown to operate as subversive media; in crises, as escapist humour; in more stable settings, as symbolic markers of social groups. The study ends by stressing the value of meme literacy in modern youth culture and the sociological relevance of visual digital communication.



Introduction

Memes have evolved over the last ten years from basic internet jokes into strong tools of social commentary, identity construction, and political opposition. Defined by Shifman (2013) as "units of cultural information that spread virally," memes have become ingrained in the digital habits of young people all around. In Pakistan, where political turmoil, media censorship, and generational divides abound, memes have surfaced as both a reflection of societal unhappiness and a mask for its expression.

Focusing on how Pakistani youth use memes in the online public sphere, this study looks at their sociological roles as resistance, diversion, and tribalism. Although worldwide meme studies (e.g., Shifman, 2013; Blackmore et al., 2000) have given basic insights, there is a dearth of context-

specific analysis of meme use in South Asia, especially Pakistan. This research helps to illuminate how digital humor acts as both a coping tool and a kind of sociopolitical engagement in limited situations by integrating theoretical concepts with primary data.

The study raises three research questions

1. How Pakistani youngsters use memes to show political resistance or criticism is done
2. How do memes provide emotional diversion and psychological comfort tools?
3. How do memes serve as tools of digital tribalism and identity development?

Through the prism of digital sociology, this study contends that memes are active meaning-making vehicles not neutral artifacts but rather ones that both mirror and reform the online communities' collective consciousness.

2. Literature Review

The sociological study of memes overlaps media literacy, digital resilience, propaganda theory, participatory culture, and as units of symbolic expression, memes have become effective weapons for shaping public opinion, impacting adolescent identity, and mirroring local and global events. Particularly in relation to disinformation, digital tribalism, and visual political communication, this literature review combines basic memetic ideas with recent empirical and analytical research from worldwide and local settings.

By defining memes as self-replicating cultural units akin to genes, Richard Dawkins (2006) established the conceptual basis. This metaphor shaped the basic knowledge of meme evolution in digital ecosystems. Milner (2016) builds on this concept by placing memes at the hub of participatory digital culture, whereby users actively remix and reinterpret pervasive ideas. Noting their ability to express ideological conflicts, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017, 2018) further examine memes as challenged cultural capital and expressive repertoires.

Donovan et al. Offer one of the most comprehensive empirical accounts in *Meme Wars* (2022), investigate how online meme Kult disestablishing U.S. politics. Their study matches regional trends in Pakistan where memes combine activism and satire. Likewise, Castells (2013) sees communication power in networked societies as a catalyst of political change, therefore underlining the importance of memes in influencing collective action.

Badrinathan (2021) undertook a field experiment in South Asia, India, to see how digital disinformation spreads and how memes—when shown as educational interventions—could affect public attitudes. Bruinenberg et al. (2021) talk about meme usage among migrant kids, therefore illustrating how humour helps them to negotiate their identity. Abines (2022) noted how memes were used in Duterte supporter groups to signal loyalty and attack dissenters, therefore emphasizing meme function in populist governments.

COVID-19 overseas kicked up meme creation. Research including Di Mascio et al. Dunleavy et al. (2021) (2022) and Janmohamed et al. Link meme diffusion to crisis communication and misinformation in 2021. According to Laor (2023), memes in Israel reinforced ideological boundaries and served as virtual coping systems. These results follow meme activity in Pakistani youth culture during pandemic lockdowns.

Many writers look at memes as areas of tribalism. Lawson et al. (2023) show how people are punished for refusing to distribute fake memes, thus strengthening group loyalty above reality.

Wilkinson (2023) brings the tribalism argument to healthcare systems by drawing ties to how internet communication strengthens insider-outsider limits. Zimmerman et al. (2022) looks at why, despite knowing the dangers of deception, individuals sometimes choose to trust—thereby clarifying meme virality.

Important background is provided by studies of digital disinformation. Highlights by Bennett and Livingston (2018), Bjola (2018), and Bjola & Papadakis (2020) how propaganda uses algorithmic amplification to undermine democratic institutions. Examples from the Baltics and Russia of how memes are weaponized to polarize, distract, or glorify strongmen—which is a tactic reflected in meme campaigns in Pakistan involving civil-military narratives—Andriukaitis (2020), Kudors (2023), and Galeotti (2019).

Bal čytien ène et al. From the Baltic region (2022), Boulianne et al. Multisectoral resilience frameworks are emphasized as essential by Kols 2022 and (2022). Their views on digital citizenship shape how young people in nations such Pakistan may develop critical meme literacy. Supported by the objectives of Pakistani civil society groups, Cömlekçi (2022) argues for broadening fact-checking into meme education.

Still underrepresented in world literature, Pakistani-specific settings are guided by similar trends. Mukhtar et al. (2024) concentrate on memes as sociolinguistic instruments spanning borders, particularly in South Asia. Their work reinforces the investigation of meme language in regional hybrids, English, and Urdu Pakistan. Emphasizing their intentional use in ideological framing, Niebuurt (2021) calls memes the "leaflet propaganda" of the digital age

Additionally, Shoukat, Awan, and Jokhiyo (2025) explore the dual role of education and meme-based political satire in shaping civic participation among young women in Sindh. Several studies and media monitoring initiatives have highlighted that women politicians in Pakistan often face digital harassment through memes and trolling, which caricature their appearance, question their competence, or hyperfocus on their private lives. This gendered meme discourse contributes to an environment of online misogyny that discourages political participation and reinforces patriarchal narratives., especially in South Asia.

Viral media captures sentiment, resistance, and identity through platforms like *KnowYourMeme* (2020), as well as user-generated memes such as “**You Don’t Mess with Putin**” (StefanKiller55, 2021), “**Christmas at the Kremlin**” (MonsieurPibb, 2016), and “**Understand the Depth**” (Sasha_Sila1975, 2023). These memes demonstrate the emotional and symbolic dimensions of digital culture. In Pakistan’s online space, similar patterns emerge—where meme creators mythologize military or political leaders, just as memes like “**Saint Javelin**” or those from **24 Channel (2017)** glorify geopolitical figures elsewhere.

Works by Kapantai et al. Exploration of classification frameworks and emotional techniques employed in meme spreading is Caled & Silva (2022), Shifman (2018) As this book does, their observations assist categorize Pakistani memes into resistance, distraction, and tribalism.

This varied body of work confirms that memes are potent semiotic tools. Although most of current research is based in Western or global North settings, the patterns of ideological polarization, emotional manipulation, and participatory communication found therein are equally relevant to Pakistan. By using worldwide theory on local meme culture, this work therefore addresses a regional research vacuum.

3. Theoretical Structure

This research uses an interdisciplinary theoretical structure combining memetic theory, digital sociology, critical media theory, and symbolic interactionism. These lenses enable a sophisticated knowledge of how memes operate as cultural instruments of communication, resistance, and identity-making in Pakistan's digital environment.

3.1 Building on Dawkins' (2006) basic idea of memes as cultural replicators, memetic theory holds that memes are imitated evolved informational units. Shifman (2013) extended this to the digital sphere, defining memes as kinds of participational media that encourage cultural negotiation, remixing, and replication. Memes quickly imitate viral behaviors predicted by Dawkins and rapidly adapt material to linguistic, political, and religious criteria, therefore spreading fast through WhatsApp, Tiktok, and Facebook in Pakistan.

3.2 Foundation for meme content to affect online cultural codes is Castell's (2013) concept of "communication power" in networked societies. Digital sociology especially helps to clarify how memes in Pakistan reflect and influence power dynamics particularly during elections, protests, or national emergency activities. Van Dijck (2013) stresses the influence of design of platforms on visibility and engagement, therefore defining which memes go viral and which remain marginal.

3.3 Drawing on Blumer and Mead, symbolic interactionism emphasizes how social interaction produces and changes meaning. Often using linguistic and cultural references—such as cricket allusions, Sufi poetry, or TV drama clichés—Pakistani memes connect in different ways relying on context. Depending on the viewer's identity, a meme alluding to General Bajwa or the depreciation of the currency could be seen as comedy, rage, or despair, hence stressing the need of negotiated meaning. Inspired by academics like Bennett and Livingston (2018), critical media theory situates memes within bigger disputes about truth, legitimacy, and media control. In Pakistan, where state power and censorship hinder traditional media, memes could act as counter-hegemonic narratives. They offer for young audiences "folk journalism," circumventing traditional gatekeepers, which highlights the hazards of echo chambers and tribal polarization.

Emphasized by Nye (2008) and Romanova et al., psychological warfare and disinformation benefit from soft power memes as well as Memes can be used not just for civic debate but also for creating ideological opinion as evidenced by campaigns extolling leaders or disparaging foreign adversaries. Russian memes (24 Channel, 2017; MonsieurPibb, 2016) reflect the heroification of Putin in Pakistani meme culture when military and religious leaders are mythologized. When considered together, these theoretical frameworks provide a multi-layered view of memes as communicative performances deeply anchored in power, culture, and everyday meaning-making in the Pakistani digital sphere.

4. Methodology

This study looks at the sociological functions of memes in Pakistan using a mixed-methods approach including qualitative content analysis and a statistical youth survey. Using both primary data sources, the study analyses general patterns of involvement across social media channels as well as the subjective interpretations of meme users.

4.1 Data Gathering

a) Over a three-month period (January to March 2025), a purposively selected sample of 30 viral memes from well-known Pakistani meme pages and Twitter accounts like @TheRealPindiBoyz, @Sarcasmistan, and Facebook groups under 'Memes of Pakistan' was collected. These memes

covered political satire (e.g., inflation, military-civilian power dynamics), religious commentary (e.g., Ramadan humor), generational conflict, celebrity culture, and nationalist pride.

b) An online Google Forms survey was distributed among 100 university students (aged 18–28) from five cities: Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar, and Hyderabad. The survey comprised open-ended and multiple-choice questions on meme use, frequency, interpretation, emotional impact, and perceived social influence. All comments were anonymized and participants were chosen using snowball sampling.

4.2 Analysis of Data

a) The chosen memes were thematically examined in qualitative content analysis to highlight their main purpose—resistance, distraction, or tribalism. Using Shifman's (2013) meme analysis model, visual semiotics and narrative structure were coded. Coding was heavily based on contextual relevance to Pakistan.

b) Descriptive statistics (frequency distributions and percentages) were applied to examine quantitative data from surveys. Thematic grouping of open-ended comments offers qualitative depth.

4.3 Ethical Issues

Everyone on the survey gave informed consent; participation in the study was voluntary. Publicly accessible meme content from the study did not use personal identifiers. Efforts were made to avoid an amplification of offensive or extremist memes. This mixed-methods approach provides triangulation between the lived experiences and interpretations of meme consumers and the symbolic analysis of cultural content (memes), hence presenting a more complex picture of meme roles in Pakistan.

5. Findings

The quantitative survey responses are summarized in the following tables:

Table 1: Frequency of Meme Sharing by Theme

Meme Theme	Number of Memes (n = 30)	Percentage
Political Resistance	12	40%
Emotional Distraction	10	33%
Digital Tribalism	8	27%

Table 2: Student Survey Results (n = 100)

Survey Question	Percentage of Respondents
Shared a political meme in the last month	72%
Use memes as safer alternative to political speech	60% (of political sharers)
Use memes for stress relief or entertainment	83%
Scroll memes before sleeping	54%
Frequently encounter tribalistic memes	62%
Shared potentially offensive memes “just for fun”	38%
Felt uncomfortable with ethnic/religious stereotyping in memes	26%

These tables support the detailed thematic analysis that follows.

The findings of this study are derived from two primary data sources: a qualitative thematic analysis of 30 viral Pakistani memes and a survey of 100 university students from five urban centres. The results are organized into three overarching themes that align with the study's research questions: memes as resistance, memes as distraction, and memes as tribalism.

5.1 Memes as Resistance

Approximately 40% of the sampled memes (12 out of 30) directly reflected political or institutional critique. These included satirical visuals mocking inflation ("1 Dollar = 300 Rupees, Coming Soon to Theaters Near You"), political leadership ("Same Faces, New Promises" featuring recycled cabinet images), and civil-military dynamics ("Invisible Hand memes" showing shadow puppets controlling politicians).

Survey data revealed that 72% of respondents had shared at least one politically themed meme in the past month. Among these, 60% reported using memes as a safer alternative to open political debate, citing fear of surveillance or online backlash. One respondent from Lahore noted, "Memes say what I cannot—especially about elections or the army."

5.2 Memes as Distraction

Roughly 33% of the analysed memes (10 out of 30) served an escapist function, often revolving around student life, relationship drama, electricity shortages, and food inflation. For instance, memes depicting "Loadshedding Olympics" (comparing Karachi vs Lahore vs Peshawar power cuts) were widely circulated.

Survey responses indicated that 83% of participants used memes "regularly" to relieve stress or boredom. A respondent from Karachi explained, "When I'm overwhelmed with university deadlines or political chaos, funny memes are my relief. They help me laugh at the mess."

Interestingly, 54% reported scrolling meme pages before sleeping, making them part of daily emotional regulation. This aligns with literature on memes as psychological buffers (Shifman, 2013).

5.3 Memes as Tribalism

About 27% of the meme sample (8 out of 30) reflected strong in-group/out-group dynamics. Common examples included India vs Pakistan cricket banter, Sindhi vs Punjabi stereotypes, or gender-based memes (e.g., "boys locker room vs girl's locker room" parodies).

62% of surveyed youth acknowledged encountering "tribalistic memes" regularly. Among them, 38% admitted they sometimes shared such content "for fun" even if they found it "slightly offensive." This reflects how humour can blur the lines between play and prejudice.

One respondent from Islamabad stated, "There's always a risk of crossing the line, but memes let us tease each other without full-blown fights." But 26% said they were uncomfortable with memes aimed at ethnic or religious groups, indicating some digital consciousness. The results point overall to memes in Pakistan being emotional safety valves, ideological carriers, and social boundary markers rather than only digital jokes. Their usage among digitally active young people shows complicated patterns of escapism, resistance, and symbolic group creation

6. Discussion

The results of this investigation confirm that memes help Pakistani youth negotiate political repression, societal disintegration, and emotional stress by acting as multi-purpose digital artifacts. Seen through the theoretical prisms of memetic theory, digital sociology, and symbolic interactionism, memes show great significance beyond simple humour.

6.1 Resistance via Comedy

Especially in settings where direct political criticism might have repercussions, memes provide little and subversive resistance. This fits Shifman's (2013) claim that memes by design are democratic since they enable horizontal communication beyond official avenues. In the Pakistani setting, where media is sometimes controlled and opposition can be monitored, memes have developed a cloaked kind of public dialogue. This 72% of students sharing political memes as 'safer speech' lends credence to the idea. By means of symbolic interactionism, such memes can be seen as types of digital protest that let people restate common grievances without direct conflict.

6.2 Psychological Tactic Distraction

The part memes play as stress relievers in epidemics—be it academic pressure or national economic instability—corroborates the results of Agrawal et al. on the emotional side of meme material in 2025. The escapist memes about student challenges, food inflation, and loadshedding suggest a group of coping mechanism. The tendency of survey participants to interact with memes before bed emphasizes how digital comedy may help people control their emotions by become part of their everyday practices. This resonates with Blackmore's (2000) assertion that memes replicate when they serve social or psychological purposes.

6.3 Symbolic Boundaries and Tribalism

Memetic culture reflects group dynamics and the natural human inclination to draw “us” versus “them.” The meme discourse around India-Pakistan rivalry, regional stereotypes, or gender banter often oscillates between harmless play and exclusionary mockery. Although symbolic interactionism would argue that peer groups negotiate meaning, the dangers of prejudice normalization—particularly via repeated exposure—mirror issues noted by Schmid et al. concerning meme-based ideological mainstreaming, that over a quarter of respondents found ethnic-targeting memes uncomfortable suggests an emerging counter-awareness and possibly a generational shift in digital ethics.

6.4 Young People, Identity, and Meme Literacy

Apart from social commentary, memes help us to create identities. Pakistani memes' regular usage of political satire, local slang, and culturally particular allusions demonstrates how digital young people develop and strengthen distinctively shared identities online. This bolsters Schultz's (2025) assertion that meme culture reflects the folk art of our time—raw, participatory, and politically charged. Moreover, the need of ‘meme literacy’ becomes critical as users navigate satire, false information, and hate speech. Memes in Pakistan, then, are not simple pastimes; they are culturally loaded messages with many uses—from dissent to distraction, from identity to ideology. Simultaneously reflective and generative, they mirror the fears of a generation and mold its expression, connection, and resistance.

7. Conclusion

Through the lenses of resistance, distraction, and tribalism, this study has investigated the multifarious part of memes in Pakistani digital culture. Based on a mix of memetic theory,

symbolic interactionism, and digital sociology, together with primary data from both meme content and youth surveys, the study shows that memes is far more than transient humor. These are complicated sociocultural writings that provide young people means of expression, critique, and identity formation in a society often restricted by social and political limits. The data shows that Pakistani young people use memes to indirectly but powerfully express political discontent, to handle daily pressures by humorizing struggle, and to engage in online communities where group affiliation and tribal identity are played out and strengthened. Still, the research also brings up serious ethical issues about how comedy might approach harm—especially in situations of ethnic, gender, and religious stereotyping. Memes should not be dismissed lightly, finally. They speak to the aspirations, conflicts, and values of the digital age generation in a strong, dispersed kind of cultural production. Memes serve as both a mirror and a megaphone in a country like Pakistan, where traditional media spaces are sometimes scarce, so reflecting our identity and enabling us to respond, even if only in pixels.

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