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RESEARCH PAPER

Effects of Slacktivism on Offline Engagement: Appraising the Role of Political Facebook Memes As a Communication Tool for Young Consumers in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The concurrent digital media environment stipulated as participatory media culture refers the active participation of citizens in politics by using Facebook memes as a communication tool. This research appraises the role of political Facebook memes as a communication tool to further investigate the effects of slacktivism on offline engagement of young Facebook users of age (18 to 36) studying at university level from 5 metropolitan cities of Pakistan, under uses and gratification theory as theoretical ground. By utilizing quantitative approach, a self-structured close ended questionnaire was employed to get responses from 1671 respondents using simple random sampling to understand the perceptions of meme consumers. The findings suggest that Political Facebook memes effectively provide information of political issues, makes politics interesting for youth, relax mind through satire while pointing loopholes in the system, hence online engagement of users also lead them to offline engagement as it makes them interested towards politics.

| **KEYWORDS** | Communication Tool, Facebook Users, Offline Engagement, Political Memes, Slacktivism |

Introduction

In this modern media environment qualified as participatory media culture the citizens are participating in digital public sphere actively and discursively and using internet memes as a tool (Huntington, 2017; Ross & River 2017; Kasriye & Faiswal, 2019*). Internet memes are an emerging form of discourse in general internet culture including discussion forums and social media platforms (Chandler, 2013; Kobierecki, 2014; Burton & Julian 2019). The participatory nature of contemporary digital culture allows average users to quickly express their rejection or agreement with political realities by utilizing mobile phone applications and social media (Bradeley,2019).

According to Bosch (2013) alternative forms of political activities are being adopted by youth in current political structure and their new mediums work at the perimeters of the dominant public sphere. According to Sengupta (2015), participatory nature of social media let users to treat political issues in personal way by storytelling or solidarity with community. Through slacktivism people share their thoughts on political issues with their online communities. According to plevriti (2014) activities related to meme like creation, dissemination and sharing are important expressions for civic engagements and active citizenship so, Facebook activism can also assist as an important gateway to civic engagement, through affective politics and connective action. Internet memes are one of the new emerging mediums of political satire, which is shaping the political views and influencing the voting behavior of meme consumers.

Bradley (2019) points out that "political memes", has raised the point that academic scholar's attitude towards involvement of memes in political discourse has changed compared to years past when memes were not seriously taken as tools for political

expressions. In academic realms research work is being done on internet memes and their effects on users at international level (kasirye,2019; Burton,2019; Garcia, Luces & Engay,2019; Bradley,2019; Ross & Rivers,2017), but no research has been done so far to assess the internet memes effects on users in Pakistan. Every country has its own sense of humor based on their social construction, culture etc. Pakistani political memes are different than western political memes and their impact on users yet needs to be explored.

According to Garcia, Luces and Engay (2019) political memes do have impact on young adult's expressions of political views. Considering this the current paper aims to evaluate the role of Facebook political memes as a communication tool among young people of Pakistan and to find out the effects of slacktivism on offline political engagement.

Literature Review

Dawkins refers memes as a small part of our culture which spreads from one another through imitation or replicating. So, memes are important component of media and political science perspective. Memes have also become new form of civic participation (Shifman, 2013). With the advent of digital technologies, digital communication and social networks have become a core aspect of modern society and Internet memes have become relatively important. (Kulkurni,2017). It was further added that Memes are communication tools for social media that communicate information by utilizing humor and satire as they are the main components of a meme. From the beginning media utilize humor as a tool to comment and criticize against oppression. (Pearce & hajizada,2014).

Internet meme helps in building opinion among citizens and are an important part of social life. Meme has various roles and to provide information is one of them. People tend to read more of a news when they exposed to meme as a primary source of information in order to get the full picture behind the meme. (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

The new era of digital communication has brought about changes in every field of human life. The information communication technology has revolutionized not only the economic, social or political life of human beings but it has also changed the political discourse, which has its vital role in modern democratic structure of a country and global world alike. So, it is pertinent to explore the memes role as a communication tool, and to assess the effects of online participation on offline engagement of meme users. The fleeting nature and minimal scale of memes, media studies scholarship, despite the transformative importance of digital media, still not take the broader cultural impact of meme seriously (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Contemporary internet culture including social media and discussion platforms are introducing internet memes as an emerging discourse. The internet meme content matters when it comes to how the users perceive and participate in politics. Research on political participation differentiates political activities and voting behavior from discursive actions (Mutz, 2006; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000).

The digital age has led to a new interface for political mobilization and has been credited with the success of several recent political movements. However, the recent growth of political ideologies previously perceived as belonging to the periphery of society has drawn new attention to the potential role of online social networks and the changing forms of political discourse of the digital age. Facebook memes are used as a communicating tool for converse of political satire (Huntington,2017).

According to Leong (2015) memes are used as a medium by political campaigners for communicating with the netizens. Images and opinions are created by hired commentators, paid bloggers and micro bloggers in the mnid of people to influence their thoughts. It was further added with reference to Azerbaijan that as a social media strategy internet memes are produced and then circulated. Even during the era of World War One Memes were used in the form of images and text for satirical artistic expressions. Cartoons

were published through print media to influence Ideologies, to propagate identities and for stereotyping. (Leong, 2015)

It is a general norm to comment and share memes to further audiences by the people who follow social media websites. The users not only produce and distribute content but are also very active to like or comment on different issues and ultimately encourages political engagement. (Brunello, 2012; Chandler, 2008).

According to Shifman(2014) alongside offline political activities internet meme could be a discursive form of online political participation. Slacktivism is the term utilized for online activities like sharing online content, liking a post, signing an online petition, uploading content and commenting on Facebook or any other social media platform. It is possible because of slacktivism that users can like and share many different things at the same time with same interest to a political converse and content (Halupka, 2014). In addition, Morozov (2011) argues that according to some critics slacktivism/clicktivism is a set of online political activities which do not include physical participation in any political act but it is completely about clicks and likes, and feeling good about yourself.

The internet is a source of connection between government and citizens and often explored for the relation between online usage and political engagement. According to Bimber (2012) in political context internet as a networked medium may lead to increased effects of networks. Due to increased social media usage People's Understanding of civic engagement and participation is altering in contemporary environment (Bennett, Freelon, Hussein & Wells, 2012; Bimber, 2012).

Internet and social media are currently utilized as a medium to do politics by the people. A study by Pew Research Center found that 39% of Americans who were eligible to vote used social media during 2012 presidential elections for political purposes by following social media accounts, reposting political content and "liking," (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady & Verba, 2012).

Gubbay (2018) discussed the effects of political memes on US elections and raised the question "But could they actually impact elections?" She answered her own question with affirmation. It was further mentioned that memes influence young adults for voting who otherwise are not very much interested in politics and potentially motivate them to vote in greater number than ever before. Garcia, Luces and Engay (2019) found that political memes do have an impact on Filipino Young Adults' expression of political views.

Every country has its own sense of humor based on their social construction, culture etc. Pakistani meme is different than western meme. Memes are also utilized in social media news especially. During 2018 election campaign social media usage was at its peak in Pakistan. According to Khan (2018) Pakistan Election Commission in order to disseminate information about general elections signed an agreement with Facebook to utilize the social media platform. According to stat counter (2022) 98.58% Pakistani use Facebook as ultimate social media platform. Rathore (2019) discussed about importance of political memes in Pakistani political discourse and describe memes as cultural moment. It is about how millennials and generation Z understand and processed reality around them. It further has been observed that with memes it is easy to interpret and share, small statements that cater to political views.

According to Moaswes (2019) Pakistan is a particularly interesting case study when it comes to examining the way memes have impacted the communication landscape. Memes play a key role in every day and informal politics within Pakistan. It was further emphasized that, as in many places, memes have come to play an important role in the political and cultural spheres of Pakistan. It was concluded that they are a new form of mass communication. In the last few years, the trend of using memes as a political weapon has grown rapidly, given their popularity among the social media- savvy youth.

In recent years a lot of research being done at international level to investigate and explore the effects of political memes on users. From existing literature, there is no doubt left that memes are affective communication tool and their effects in digital public sphere needs to be explore in Pakistani political converse as well.

In this research the researcher investigates the role of memes as a communication tool in digital sphere of Pakistan for young people and further try to find the effects of online slacktivism on offline engagement among young Facebook users.

Hypotheses

H1: Facebook memes play an effective role as a communication tool.

H2: Online political engagement through Facebook memes is associated with offline political engagement.

Theoretical framework

Focusing staunchly on the audience-led motives of media utilization, in 1974, Katz and Blumler devised the well-researched and widely justified Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) as an addition to the body of knowledge related to communication and media studies.

Different studies for different queries have been done to explore uses and gratifications of online social media plat form users (Phua, Jin and Kim, 2017; Quinn, 2016; Quan-Hasse and Young, 2010; Chen, 2010; Johnson and Yang, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000).

Bradley (2019) explains about users' needs and gratification of consuming Facebook memes by adding that audience expose themselves to certain memes because they are interested in some kind of reward. It was further explained that according to Schramm's formula "Fraction of selection" there is a need to determine the reward and then the required effort, Reward could be information, taking a break, easiness of sharing and online political participation etc. and required effort could be his/her physical participation in some kind of political meeting and rally. Facebook users in Pakistan have preferred political memes and memificated videos to gratify their politainment needs.

Material and Methods

A quantitative approach was utilized through a survey by designing a self-structured close ended questionnaire to assess the opinions of public sector university students aged (18 to 36) years from 4 metropolitan and 1 federal capital of Pakistan. The sample size consisted of 1671 respondents. The data was collected through online survey using google form hence simple random sampling technique was applied.

Results and Discussion

Hypotheses Testing

In order to test the hypotheses to find significant relationships between independent and dependent variables the pre constructed questionnaire was validated by measuring the reliability of the desired variables. After a reliability test, all the measures of instrument utilized in this research were found valid and reliable. The calculated value of Cronbach alpha values were within the accepted ranges of reliability test score of 0.7. The alpha values are presented in the table 1

Table 1
Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test for Independent and Dependent Variables

Variables	No of Items	Cronbach's α-value
Independent Variables		

Facebook Political Memes	5	0.707 (N=1671)
Online Political Engagement	3	0.891 (N=1671)
Dependent Variables		
Role as communication tool	9	0.874 (N=1671)
Offline Political Engagement	7	0.781 (N=1671)

Regression and Correlation Analysis

H₁: Political Facebook memes play an effective role as communication tool.

Table 2
Correlation of Independent and Dependent variables

Variables	(1)	(2)
(1) Political Facebook Memes	1.000	
(2) Role as communication tool	0.507*	1.000

Table 3
Simple Linear Regression of role as communication tool and Facebook political Memes

Role as communication tool	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	95% Conf	Interval	Sig
Political Facebook Memes	1.141	.048	24.01	0	1.048	1.234	***
Constant	7.507	.326	23.04	0	6.867	8.146	***

Mean dependent var	14.974	SD dependent var	4.611
R-squared	0.257	Number of obs	1671
F-test	576.617	Prob > F	0.000
Akaike crit. (AIC)	9357.202	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	9368.045

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1*

The statistical analysis of simple linear regression between political Facebook memes and role as communication tool reflects a significant relationship between the independent variable political Facebook memes and dependent variable role as communication tool. Where (R^2=.257, F=576.61, β=7.50, p-value =0.000). The linear regression model as shown above clearly communicates that the independent variable political Facebook Memes caused 25.7% change in the dependent variable of role as communication tool. As the p-value is <0.05 which means the change in the dependent variable is statistically significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that this hypothesis stands approved statistically.

H₂: Online political engagement through Facebook memes is associated with offline political engagement.

Table 4
Correlation of Independent and Dependent variables

Variables	(1)	(2)
(1) Online Political Engagement	1.000	
(2) Offline Political Engagement	0.473*	1.000

Table 5
Simple Linear regression of Offline Political engagement & Online Political Engagement:

Offline Political Engagement	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
Online Political Engagement	.871	.065	13.42	0	.744	.998	***
Constant	11.537	.445	25.92	0	10.664	12.41	***
Mean dependent var		17.236		SD dependent var		5.715	
R-squared		0.097		Number of obs		1671	
F-test		180.010		Prob > F		0.000	
Akaike crit. (AIC)		10399.525		Bayesian crit. (BIC)		10410.368	

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

The statistical analysis of simple linear regression between online political engagement and offline political engagement indicates a significant relationship between the independent variable online political engagement and dependent variable offline political engagement. Where (R^2=0.097, F=180.01, β=11.53, p-value =0.000). The linear regression model as shown above clearly communicates that the independent variable online political engagement caused 1% change in the dependent variable of offline political engagement. As the p-value is <0.05 which means the change in the dependent variable is statistically significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that this hypothesis is accepted statistically.

The main purpose of the study is to appraise the role of Political Facebook memes as a communication tool and to investigate the effects of online slacktivism (to Facebook political memes) on offline political engagement in Pakistan.

The first hypothesis of this research paper explains the role of political Facebook meme as a communication tool for its users. The items gauge the role of political memes as an effective source of delivering political message(80%), lead them to new political information(87%), update about a political issue or development(73%), often relatable to certain situation(87%), help to relax mind because of sarcasm its providing, pointing loopholes in system in a humorous way(86%), quite easy to understand(85%), source of political satire(83%) and makes politics interesting(81%). The respondents' percentages of agreement with each item are mentioned above to have an idea of affirmative responses of respondents towards the role of political Facebook memes as communication tool. The overall results of regression analysis laud the hypothesis approved, where the correlation among Facebook political memes and role as communication tool is significantly positive (r= .50*). The results of tested hypothesis reflect that both the independent and dependent variables have a significant relationship (as R^2=.257, F=576.61, β=7.50, p-value =0.000). Effective political communication is the requisite for the democratic development and civic education of any society (Hatfield, 2018). Like other developing countries, in Pakistan the modern means of mass communication have metamorphosed from traditional mainstream media to digitally operated consumer-centric social media (Carney, 2022). Political knowledge and information conveyed through mainstream media has mostly remained an issue of less interest among the youth (Erpyleva, 2021). However, with the rise of social media specially political memes have garnered the attention of younger generation as an effective tool of communication.

Political memes are created in a way that they act as fast food of information (Tandon et al., 2022). Memes are easily digestable and just by quickly having a look, meme user can get an idea of the denoted issue or piece of information. Culturally familiar expression of information makes political memes an effective tool of communication among masses of any particular society (López-Paredes & Carrillo-Andrade, 2022).

In addition to this, citizens also design and spread political memes to express socio-political follies, resentment with government and to criticise political oppression with tools of linguistic dexterity like humor and satire (Milner, 2013). political memes effectively communicate political satire, also the political memes humorously highlight loop holes in the system. political memes offer relaxation to mind due to their catchy, humorous and playful nature.

In short answering the first question; the aforementioned quantitative findings gathered through nine items in the survey questionnaire reflect how Facebook memes play their role as a communication tool in Pakistan.

The second hypothesis of the study investigates the effects of online slacktivism on offline engagement in Pakistan. The items used to assess the online engagements effects on offline engagement were political memes lead to discuss political issues offline (84%), online commenting leads to offline commenting (85%), online participation leads to offline participation (81%), learning something online motivates to participate in physical political activities offline (80%), online participation lead to slacktivism not offline participation (85%) and lastly slacktivism leads to offline engagement (86%). The respondents' percentages of agreement with each item are mentioned above to have an idea of affirmative responses of the Facebook meme users for association between online political engagement and offline political engagement. Exposure to information and access to knowledge are the prerequisites for educating oneself either politically or apolitically. Political participation is not possible until a citizen is informed enough to make meaningful decisions that entail political repercussions (Heiskanen, 2017). Political memes have been denoted as a quick source of political information that complement public discourses, thus affirming the previous researches (Milner, 2013; Mukhongo, 2020; Sharbaugh & Nguyen, 2014); in this study under hand, the researcher ascertained that Facebook political meme users acknowledged that online exposure to Facebook political memes led them to discuss political issues with their offline public sphere.While commenting, sharing or liking the meme content of Facebook page users get emotionally aroused sometimes and it affect their changed political views and often voting behavior. Memes help to shape narratives so online viewing or discussion lead them to offline discussion on political issues

The results of correlation analysis of online political engagement and offline political engagement reflected that correlation among both variables was significantly positive (r=.47*).The results of tested hypothesis via quantitative data analysis reflect that both the independent and dependent variables have a significant relationship (R^2=0.097, F=180.01, β=11.53, p-value =0.000). The independent variable is associated with the dependent variable because the former caused 1% change in the later thus the hypothesis (H_2) lauds as approved. As per the H_2 of this study, Online Political Engagement and Offline Political Engagement were the independent and dependent variables, respectively.

In short answering the second question; the aforementioned quantitative findings gathered through the survey questionnaire reflect that Facebook memes utilized by Pakistani users entail affective quality thus; online engagement of Pakistani users with political memes on Facebook effects their offline political engagement because information gathered through political memes motivate them to participate in political events and debates.

Conclusion

Political knowledge and information conveyed through mainstream media has mostly remained an issue of less interest among the youth. However, with the rise of social media especially political memes have garnered the attention of younger generation as an effective tool of communication in both developed and less developed countries like Pakistan. Memes usually depict complex ideas in a compact, sarcastic and humorous manner. Memes help in shaping narratives of their consumers so, Facebook users expressed

their opinion that online commenting on Facebook political memes can lead people to comment/converse on political issues in offline spheres. We can conclude that People with or without defined political affiliations use memes to exhibit their online engagement and supplement their discourse during offline gatherings.

Recommendations

Memes are here to stay and will become more powerful medium for conveying and influencing young minds of new upcoming voting community of generation-Z. Memes have become the part of popular culture and in order to rig views and behaviors of young targets, political campaigners and content creators can utilize memes as a communication tool to create their interest in politics. The current study only caters the information provided by university students through online survey. There is a lot more room to assess the opinions of other age groups and walks of life regarding the political memes. Furthermore, meme content other than political can be investigated. Content analysis and semiotic discourse analysis of famous memes can also be done. There is more to explore in memetic rhetoric in Pakistani setting.

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