

Mememes, Youth and Political Communication: An Analysis of Memetic Discourses of Political Parties During 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

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Abstract: *The surge in digitization popularized social media-driven elections in the 2024 general elections. This paper explores how national political parties – Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (INC) – are utilizing memes to connect with multicultural youth voters. Building upon Agenda-Setting Theory of McCombs and Shaw (1972), Framing of Entman (2010) and Uses and Gratifications of Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973), this paper employs Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, this study identifies thematic underpinnings in memetic campaigns to examine what differentiates ordinary memes from political ones. The thematic analysis of BJP and INC memes reveal that the majority of the content was designed for youth voters. The juxtaposition of multimedia graphics, strategic content delivery, platform choice, post timings, multilingual components, and thematic relevance to youth issues were ingrained in both parties' memes. This paper identifies how the political parties have increasingly channeled memes in their online discourses to influence youngsters across geographies. As digital democracies struggle against accusations of selective empathy and sidelining minorities, this study establishes that careful digital planning can foster inclusion of voices of the marginalized.*

Keywords: Social media, Meme, Election, Youth, Political communication

INTRODUCTION

With over 600 million users, India is among the leading internet consumers globally (Padmavathy & Kandavel, 2024). Intensive smartphone usage and data connectivity have redefined how people engage with politics. Social media is gradually taking over as the new public sphere providing both the state and citizens common forums for political deliberation. These technological affordances of online platforms have redirected political parties to invest in specialized political communication through Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and WhatsApp. Digital spaces as these enhance discursivity by fuelling political engagement and voter mobilization (Neyazi, et al., 2016). Marked by phrases, slogans, catch tunes, jingles, and text, memes are the new normal in online discourse. The amalgamation of multimedia alongside an interplay of satire and humour makes them easily comprehensible to multicultural viewers. Their communicative visuality and affective potentialities diversify their reach to wider audiences (Srikandi, et al., 2024).

In the 2024 general elections for the 18th Lok Sabha, political parties increasingly used memes in their official social media channels. The 2014 and 2019 elections also witnessed the usage of digital content (Sharma, 2022) but the surge in use of memes to target youth voters in 2024, combined with enhanced digitization, invites academic intervention. Several reasons can be attributed to why parties proliferated their social profiles with memes, the most prominent being: to cut their marketing costs. Expense-wise, memes can be created, remixed and reshared at nominal costs against the traditional pamphlets, posters, and billboards (Wang, et al., 2023). They can disseminate political messages in real-time, cutting across language barriers and geographical divides without using highly sophisticated messaging but only trending buzzwords to appeal.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Youth and social media

As an umbrella term, youth encompass both millennials (born between 1980 and 2000) and Gen Z (birth years from 1997 to 2012). Despite their distinct generational gaps, both millennials and Gen Z are avid users of online platforms for identity-enhancement and self-expression (Butler, 2024). Pal (2018) elaborates the motivations for

their social media usage as both pro-social and personal, including pursuits of information sharing, learning and education, and social capital. These driving factors have made youths the core targets of marketing, infotainment and politics. In fact, brands manoeuvre micro targeting and promotion strategies to target youth as they are most likely to interact with digital campaigns (Montgomery, et al., 2009). With regards to politics too, youth are the major target audiences of social media campaigns (Egbunike, 2020). They also constitute the biggest consumers, opinion makers and shapers of online trends.

Mememes and memetic theory

Aaen-Stockdale (2017) echoes Richard Dawkins when likening mememes to genes, underlining that mememes reproduce culture as genes replicate hereditary materials. They are snippets of culture passed on as ideas, beliefs, and thoughts. They stand out for their unique combination of audio, text, video and images moulded in irony, satire and humour. Their affective and cross cultural communication capabilities rouse sentiments of viewers among the disengaged, disillusioned and stigmatized (Mihăilescu, 2024).

Our daily social media overflows with mememes on popular culture, finance, leisure, and politics but these genres are quite distinct from each other; and only adept youth viewers excel at such categorical identifications. Even when the mememe languages are different, the visuals speak for themselves; hence engaging youth to interact with them across diverse geographies. Such participatory cultures are a hallmark of democracies where citizens express, profess, protest and conform to sociopolitical norms digitally. Especially youngsters consider participation in online deliberations a confirmation of their digital citizenships (Ihlebak, 2017).

Other reasons why mememes resonate in multicultural online spaces is due to their abstract visuality, rich multimodality and informal linguistics. However, all mememes do not garner attention, some die out even before circulation. Memetic theory underscores that most mememes do not replicate unless they contain contextual familiarity and relatable vernaculars within their targeted audiences (Smith, et al., 2024).

Mememes in politics

Alafnan (2025) expounds that the discursive abilities of mememes attained through imitation and re-modification are crucial for enabling seamless politics in social media. Baishya (2021) notes that the humorous representations of reality assist in initiating multiplatform dialogues. Prominence of memetic politics is visible in digital democracies where integration of digitization and governance are transforming the political landscape. In particular, India has witnessed transformative capacities of social media-driven elections of 2014 and 2019 (Jumle & Vignesh, 2024). Digital spaces of political parties mobilized communication and platformed civic discourses (Chakravarty, 2024). Chiefly, parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC) and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) channelled the power of mememes to target youths in widespread geographies (Neog, 2023) in earlier elections.

Lynch (2022) cautions that mememes can cause polarized narratives, misinformation and echo chambers. They can even enrage citizens towards violence, misogyny, insurgency, and propaganda. Such effects have been examined quantitatively for their efficacy and engagement; and qualitatively for their thematic messaging. Deploying content, discourse and semiotic analyses, the impact of mememes have been exemplified but available literature rarely addresses epistemological gaps in its theorization (Galip, 2024). Moreover, it is not adequately answered why all mememes are sarcastic but not all of them are political thus igniting a conceptual gap: What distinguishes an ordinary mememe from political mememes? This question falls within the scope of the present study, and is pertinent within the broader literature of memetic theory.

Available literature elaborates mememe-based social media campaigns during protest movements, social causes and episodic upheavals but such episodic selections expose the lack of longitudinal studies in comprehending the long-term impacts of memetic framing. In the Indian context, comparative studies of social media strategies of parties have formed the subject of research but how political parties explore memetic messaging over a sustained, long-term period (before and after elections) is lacking. Hence, the present study explores mememes shared by BJP and INC in the runup to, and the post-results phase of the 18th Lok Sabha.

Furthermore, the predominance of youth-based mememes in BJP and INC's social profiles during the 2024 general elections have been systematically analysed to understand underlying themes. This paper therefore seeks to answer: (i) What are the thematic categories of BJP and INC mememes during the 18th Lok Sabha? and, (ii) What makes an ordinary mememe different from a political mememe?

Theoretical framework

This study is situated in the domain of social media politics and therefore warrants a conceptual grounding in digital political communication.

Agenda-Setting Theory – Developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), it states that in disseminating information to concerned publics, mass media operate on a predetermined agenda to significantly influence public perceptions. The media highlights certain issues and downplays the others. Such agenda setting function is performed by social media platforms that disburse tailored messages to amplify discourses and shape voter opinions. Utilizing hashtags and mememes, political parties set the dominant narratives thereby suppressing unfavourable ones.

Framing – Entman (2010) conceptualizes media framing as the behaviour by which mass media pre-decides what particular positions its viewers will take when attributing salience to news items. Framing is strategically deployed by media organizations for garnering sociopolitical gains. By filtering out topics, gatekeeping news and selectively emphasizing youth issues during elections, political parties design mememes with latent meanings. These meanings are meant to be deciphered by youths to reinforce identities, aspirations and solidarities (as desired by the parties who create them).

Uses and Gratifications – Proposed by Katz, Blumler

and Gurevitch (1973), this theory explains that individuals have social, informative and gratification needs when accessing media content. It posits that audiences are active consumers of media, not passive viewers. Millennials and Gen Z have gratification needs like self-expression, online interaction, political participation, among others, for which they use social media. Through youth-centric messaging in memes, parties personalize their communication to directly engage with youngsters. By doing so, they cater to voting segments and directly affect political discourses in online spaces.

While agenda-setting and framing theories outline the content strategies used by parties in memes, uses and gratifications explain the reason youths engage with such messaging. Together, the theoretical foundations guide the present study to decipher thematic underpinnings of political memes.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a thematic analysis of memes posted by BJP and INC through their official profiles between 1st January and 30th June 2024. In terms of social media following and engagement metrics, both BJP and INC enjoy a clear dominance over other regional and national parties. Their respective leaderships, Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, are constantly framed by mainstream news discourses as ideological opponents. For these reasons, the study confines to a thematic analysis of the two parties while excluding the others.

Study design and scope

This study takes on a qualitative approach, focused at dissecting themes in the memes shared by the two parties during 18th Lok Sabha. It explores the embedded framing (linguistic and vernaculars) and implied meanings of memes. To grasp their full contextual references, the study includes pre-poll and post-poll memes thus encapsulating the timeline from 1st January 2024 to 30th June 2024.

Data and sampling technique

Data was collected from official profiles of the parties on Instagram (@bjp4india and @incindia), Facebook (@BJP4India and @IndianNationalCongress) and X (@BJP4India and @INCIndia). The unit of analysis were meme posts and their comment threads. Employing stratified sampling, memes were sampled via platform-specific searches (looping in only political hashtags) of daily trends. The sampling yielded a corpus of 176 memes (98 from BJP and 78 from INC).

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis was applied to analyse the culmination of memes and comment threads. At first, we immersed ourselves into the data stream to identify patterns and thematise their meanings to develop initial codes. To represent the multimodality of memes, we employed inductive coding and approached the dataset without any premediated notions. Through continuous reflexivity, we assigned codes like “internet slang”, “youth issues”, “daily struggles”, “common man’s peril”, “citizen aspirations”, “party branding”, “leader endorsement”, “pop culture reference”, “satirical attack”, “aspirational”, “shareable emotion”, “call-to-action”, “youth motivation”

and so on. Further reading of the comment threads under memes exported to Microsoft Excel informed our next stage of assorting themes according to impacts. The sheet was then imported to Atlas.ti software wherein final themes were developed. Meme posts with youth interactions were deployed to the software side-by-side to transcribe verbatim their emotive connotations. Triangulation was conducted by comparing emerging themes from memes against comment threads by youths. This innovative triangulation and mapping via the software ensured that the derived themes matched youth interpretations of memes. It also ascertained the gratification needs of youths fulfilled by the memes.

Social media profiles of BJP and INC are public in nature and thus the present study treats them as freely available data in the public domain. To avoid invasion of privacy of youths in the comment section, we refrain from naming the users or including their personal or religious belief in the data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interplay of mixed emotions in BJP and INC memes

The thematic analysis of BJP and INC memes revealed that the majority of the content was designed for youth voters. The juxtaposition of multimedia graphics, strategic content delivery, platform choice, post timings, multilingual components, and thematic relevance to youth issues were ingrained in both parties’ memes. Contrary to popular beliefs, memes are no longer superficial trolls but highly developed forms of persuasive communication. Both parties intensified their meme usage, imbibing youth vernaculars, online slangs, popular culture, audio remixes and everyday struggles.

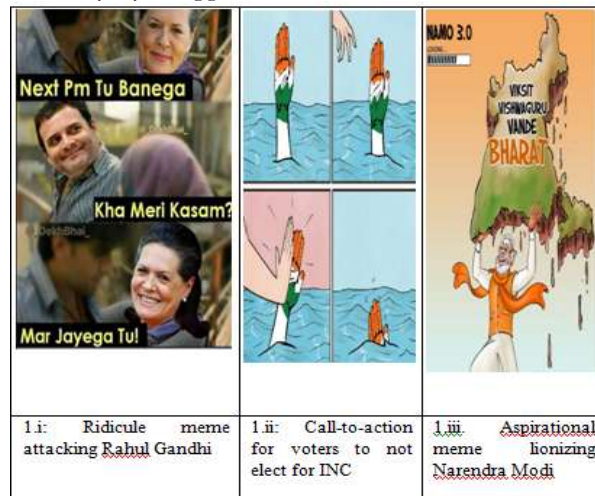


Figure 1: Thematic political memes in BJP’s social media during 2024 general elections

Party-specific memes were shared by BJP via hashtags #Modi ki Guarantee (Modi’s Guarantee), #ModiHaiTobMumkinHai (It’s possible if there’s Modi), #ParikshaPeCharcha (discussion on education), #ViksitBharat, #Modi ka Parivar (Modi’s family), and others. The content of these memes centred around youth careers, nationalism, cultural pride, futuristic technology, global leadership, indigenous culture, and encouragement of small businesses. INC memes displayed youth struggles, inflation,

unemployment, secularism, jobs for women and youth, insuring farmers, caste census, opposing dictatorship, among others. Their meme campaigns were popularized through #NjyayYatra (journey for Justice), #Bhartibharosa (reliance on Indians), #Peblinaukaripakki (first job guaranteed) #RahulForBehtarBharat (Rahul for Better India), #IAmRahulGandhi, among others. Overall, four definitive themes emerge from these memetic campaigns:

- (i) Aspirational (memes on future aspirations like #ViksitBharat),
- (ii) Relatable (resonance of daily realities like unemployment, electricity bills, examinations, etc.),
- (iii) Call-to-action (seeking voters' intervention to elect the party),
- (iv) Ridicule (invoking insults and ridicule against opponents).

Party-specific memes not only sustained online banter of citizens but also negotiated the salience of youth issues over preexisting ones. These thematic projections demonstrated vernacular nuances and youth rhetorics which is different from static traditional advertising. Online memes were equally localized, if not more than offline rallies. Such meme-based campaigns were also more cost effective than outdoor electioneering.



Figure 2: Thematic political memes in INC's social media profiles during 2024 general elections

Comparative analysis of BJP and INC memes

By targeting youngsters through meme campaigns, political parties worked continuously during 18th Lok Sabha to build a steady flow of information on news and events, thus reinforcing collective ideologies and political identity building. Among the thematic categorizations of aspirational and relatable memes, candidatures of leaders were bolstered with emotions, praises, and personal histories by both parties. Both proliferated hashtags in meme posts, thus inducing multiplatform algorithms to rehash the same content for widening reach. Such instances demonstrate that social media politics unite ideologies to create, sustain and modify long-term discourses in digital democracies.

Moreover, memes of the parties differed in content presentation and planning, but they resembled each other

when using youth-centric themes to reinstate ideologies. Their usage of Bollywood references to propagate political messages were also similar.

BJP's youth-focused campaigning is not new, but their implementation of updated trends like remix autotunes and youth-specific vernaculars is praiseworthy. INC also tapped the potential of latest trends to connect with young voters. Their adoption of trending memes are reflective of the fact that parties can sustain in fast-paced digital environments only if their communication is dynamic and evolutionary to suit the demands of mass media evolution. It also highlights that political communication is neither linear nor restricted to elections; they are perpetual discourses before and beyond polling stages.

Characteristics of political memes used in 2024 Lok Sabha elections

In fact, youths are responsive to political discourses through memes both with and without elections. Not all memes garnered interaction from youngsters, restricting their engagement to topics about politics, governance, and society. These topics assisted in typifying the elements that appeal to youth voters, and thus classified the characteristics that differentiate a political meme from an ordinary one. Chances of virality of an ordinary meme aren't as much as political memes; the former being impersonal and unintentional while the latter is personal and purposeful. An ordinary meme uses popular culture casually to connect with youth but a political meme strategically employs ongoing events and news to inform or appeal. Both kinds of memes have symbolic messaging, but ordinary memes are more abstract and political memes are unambiguous.

Conclusively, these are the main characteristics that differentiate an ordinary meme from a political one :

- Aggressive typography and hard-hitting colour schemes
- Heavy iconography for branding candidates
- Recall of party slogans and counter-slogans
- Buzzwords and catchphrases referring to offline campaigns
- Mockery and ridicule of opposition
- News analysis replete with personal opinions that are passed on as expert prediction
- Casual references to pop culture, mythology and religious texts
- False flags, fake news and misinformation

Whereas ordinary memes may or may not be intended at persuasion, political memes are tailored to affect opinions. When such memes are shared by parties, they interact directly with citizen consciousness transcending beyond online realms to offline conversations, ultimately influencing voters directly and/or indirectly.

CONCLUSION

From digital footprints of culture, memes are emerging as a regular component in online political communication. Their role in fuelling youth participation and political engagement in digital democracies are particularly commendable. In contrast to earlier research on the virality metrics and engagement strategies of memes, the present study conducts a descriptive analysis in an

attempt to theorize political memes. Also, it spells out ingredients that are potent in attracting youth to online political deliberations.

The diversity in content of BJP and INC's memes foreground how technologies and platforms can responsibly accommodate public concerns from a cross section of political cultures without alienating minorities. As digital democracies struggle against accusations of selective empathy and sidelining minorities, this study establishes that careful digital planning can foster inclusion of voices of the marginalized. For new media researchers in particular, this study advocates for digital literacy practices beyond software and extending towards digital folklore practices (cartoons, memes, caricatures).

By analysing two ideological opponents' social media during elections, the study has also curated a blueprint of online strategies for constructing sustained social and political thought. It also cautions that political memes can simplify topics but can also amplify stereotypes. Consequently, these insights invite further research in memetic theory, social media elections, and political communication.

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