

Visual Digital Resistance: Examining the Humor and Hostility in Pakistani Instagram Memes Post Pahalgam Incident

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Abstract

This study examines the role of memes as a form of digital resistance in response to the Indian threat following the Pahalgam incident of April 22, 2025. When geopolitical tension between Pakistan and India heightened, Instagram emerged as a platform where humour and satire were used to counter hostility. This study is based on a thematic analysis of 20 purposefully selected memes shared in a week after the Pahalgam incident. The research identifies recurring themes such as satirical nationalism, military symbolism, historical parallels, and emotional catharsis. These memes were political expression, digital resistance, and solidarity in response to Indian propaganda. The findings reveal humour and hostility in memes counter political threats by becoming “weapons of the week”. The study highlights that memes serve as symbols of resilience, determination, and unwavering nationalist spirit. This study contributes to the growing discourse on digital resilience and activism showing how Humour and sarcasm are incorporated in forms of memes to maintain peace at the time of conflict.

Keywords: Digital Resistance, Memes, Political Satire, Instagram, Humour and Hostility Pahalgam Incident.

1. Introduction

Internet availability via mobile devices has transformed social media platforms in empowering people to generate and disseminate information globally within seconds which has become a reason for the decline of traditional media outlets. The utilization of traditional media platforms experienced a reduction concurrently with the escalation of Internet consumption (Gaskins & Jerit, 2012). Internet specifically has significantly influenced the manner in which individuals acquire knowledge regarding political matters (Kleinberg & Lau, 2009) their degree of civic participation (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003) and the characteristics of political dialogue (Lawrence et al., 2010).

Social media platforms operate more rapidly than traditional media in actively reshaping the ideologies and approaches of how users perceive and engage with national and global issues. Social media platforms certainly are productive tools in operating as vital outlets for entertainment, building relationships, and expressing oneself (Nowrangi, 2022).

Social media platforms have created new opportunities and challenges for socio-political transformation and proved to be a valuable means of communication during local and global crises ranging from terrorist attacks to natural disasters by providing real-time updates with a feature to create, share, and reshare from all around the world (Rehman & Riaz, 2021).

In the wake of the April 22, 2025, Pahalgam clash provoked intensive debate on social media platforms particularly on Instagram with extensive visuals and content related to the incident being widely shared. The incident claimed 26 casualties dramatically intensifying tension between India and Pakistan. In response to this incident India executed disciplinary measures like suspending the “Indus Waters Treaty, downgrading diplomatic ties, and blocking Pakistani cultural accounts” (India Today News Desk, 2025).

In an era characterized by the growing influence of digital publics on national discourse, Instagram, a platform frequently linked to lifestyle content and visual narratives, emerged as an unanticipated venue for geopolitical

expression (Green & Martinez, 2018). As India and Pakistan relations hit boiling point, Instagram, the online space turned into a warzone of memes with citizens from both nations hurling Humor and sarcasm to rally behind their flags, especially Pakistani users used memes as a tool of digital resistance against external threats from India being digitally activist. Memes have been growing in popularity as a means of sharing knowledge, feelings, opinions, and distinctive points of view about particular topics or events, including the current state of politics (Dwivedi, 2023). Memes are powerful political expressions that transmit cultural concepts, symbols, and customs (Javed et al., 2022).

Memes challenge societal power structures with byzantine yet powerful critiques through Humor, parody, and other forms of representation (Milner, 2016). The use of Humor and satire in political discourse is not new, but the internet and social media have augmented its reach and impact with time (Bulatovic, 2019).

Following the Incident, Indian users started targeting Pakistanis and Pakistanis by sharing hostile comments and objectionable posts on social media platforms, especially on Instagram. They started framing Pakistan as a terrorist nation and wanted to wipe out Pakistan from the map of the world. Rather than remaining silent or submissive, Pakistanis used this form of engagement to push back, turning the act of roasting their opponent into a form of survival and national solidarity in the digital space. In Pakistan, memes are supposed to be an authoritative medium for reflecting the societal narratives (Abbas et al., 2024).

India's aggressive online rhetoric was efficiently contradicted by a meme from Pakistani users, who incorporated Humor, sarcasm, and visual satire in their memes. Unlike in this time, meme exchanges were a tool Pakistanis used as digital resistance. Digital resistance happens to be progressive and anti-authoritarian activities that strive to use technology to take down or challenge the dominant power structure (Couture et al., 2023).

Memes were used by Pakistani users as a way to retaliate against Indian threats showing digital resistance within the framework of digital activism. The way Pakistani users react to Indian threats via memes is distinctly showing the resistance as they are not entertaining the users but in reality, they are potent tools of resistance and national affirmation. To escape the harshness of reality, People in Pakistani society strive to find the Humorous side of every situation (Noor & Arshad, 2024). Humor plays an important role in overcoming the undesirable effects of conflicts. History has witnessed those tough periods when Humor was the only way to express views against hostility (Zelizer, 2010).

2. Objectives

- To identify the themes in the Pakistani Instagram memes regarding the Pahalgam incident
- To examine the role of memes as a form of digital resistance during times of threat and fear in the context of the Pahalgam incident.

3. Research Questions

RQ1: What are the major themes in the Pakistani Instagram memes in the context of the Pahalgam incident?

RQ2: How do these memes use Humour and hostility in communicating about political emotional opinions memes as a form of digital resistance?

4. Literature Review

Social media has elevated the internet as a source of information and influence at the same time (Hanna et al., 2011). The upsurge of social media has transformed geopolitical conflicts into hybrid battlespaces where narratives and perceptions are shaped through visuals, tweets, and memes. Social media has evolved in visuals, particularly in the forms of memes, that are manifested as a powerful tool of resilience in response to social and political issues.

Humour in conflict communication is an agent of reach and propinquity through social media platforms (Zelizer, 2010). Memes are digital artifacts used to illustrate symbolic protest and highlight social issues,

often catalysing civic engagement (Tufekci, 2017). Moreover, memes are also considered as commentary on political values as well as social critique (Campbell & Sheldon, 2021).

Memes on political situations are widely regarded as coping strategies within in repressive political environment. In such a context, Humor becomes the only viable resistance available for expressing political dissatisfaction. Memes are usually produced in large numbers and shared on the internet by millions of users, this weaponized the memes as an effective tool against political rivals (Bulatovic, 2019).

In Pakistan, cyber surveillance, censorship, and restrictions on freely discussing social and political issues have given rise to Humorous forms of resistance by social media users through memes. Memes depict and criticize the social and political system of society as a form of resistance against hostility. It generally focuses on challenging stereotypical and orthodox approaches using Humorous text with attention-grabbing visuals. In the context of South Asian digital culture, memes are used to express resistance and shape identity (Zeb et al., 2025).

Memes are cultural lexes that absurdly depict everyday life in India. They consist of visuals and text, from Bollywood celebrities to family dynamics. On the other hand, Pakistani memes have substantial political themes that act as an unseen form of resistance by echoing concerns through wit and sarcasm (Abbas et al., 2024).

Amid the cross-border tension between Pakistan and India, memes act as a catalyst that not only pushes back against the hostile narrative but also uses Humor as a strategic tool. On 22 April 2025, in Indian-administered Kashmir, Pahalgam, a terrorist attack claimed the lives of two dozen people who were there as tourists (Rawnsley, 2025). The attack, which had far-reaching repercussions across the region, further intensified the tensions between India and Pakistan. In response, the Indian government issued war threats against Pakistan and ended all mutual agreements between the two countries (Agence France Presse, 2025).

Indian media and users were trying to defame Pakistan and within no time Pakistanis launched a flood of memes with satirical images roasting their

nemesis and it flowed faster than Indus water (Ahtesham, 2025). Memes usually go viral on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook and are known as social media memes (Shifman, 2012). It acts as a medium of digital resistance in Pakistan (Zeb et al., 2025) And also serves as a path of Digital activism that stands for political, social, or environmental rights on social media platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

This study aims to investigate the role of memes which not only served as a coping mechanism in the face of political tensions between Pakistan and India after the Pahalgam incident but also acted as an assertion of national identity and political agency and how Pakistani users militarised Humour as a strategic tool for digital resistance by using memes visual and textual language. The threatening statements made by the India made situation worse and more complicated but Pakistani users, particularly on Instagram, were involved in a distinctive approach of digital resistance particularly known as the creation of memes.

Despite growing scholarly interest in digital activism and digital resistance, this area of research focusing on the use of Humour and satire through memes as acts of digital activism and digital resistance during episodic geo-political crises is underexplored.

5. Method

This research is based on qualitative research design i.e., thematic analysis to understand Pakistani Instagram memes related to the Pahalgam incident.

5.1 Data Collection

Purposive sampling of 20 viral memes from Pakistani Instagram accounts known for their comedy and political satire made up the study's data related to the Pahalgam incident. These memes were chosen within a certain time period i.e., one week after the incident to guarantee relevancy and topicality, and they were found using hashtags related to the Pahalgam incident (e.g., #Pahalgam, #PahalgamIncident, #PakIndiaTensions).

Memes that directly or indirectly mentioned the Pahalgam incident either by direct mention or symbolic representation (e.g., using flags, figures, or well-known references related to the event) were the only ones included to

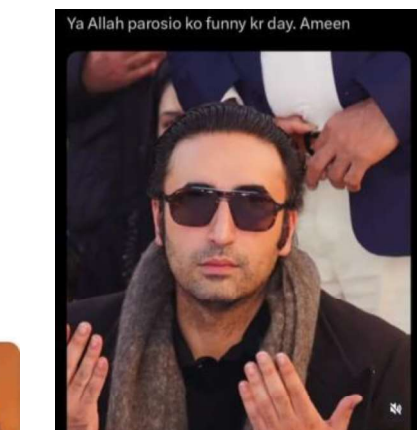
maintain credibility and contextual relevance. A variety of stylistic techniques, such as comic strips, screenshots, and picture macros, are represented by the chosen memes.

- i. **Familiarization:** Every meme was analysed several times in order to comprehend its linguistic and visual elements, such as hashtags, cultural representations, text, and imagery.
- ii. **Coding:** To create initial codes, the meme set's frequent visual components, linguistic patterns, and emotional wordings were found.
- iii. **The development of themes:** Codes were categorized into possible themes with an emphasis on digital resistance and political and emotional communication.
- iv. **Theme Review:** To make sure the themes appropriately reflect the dataset and address the study questions, they were improved. This required examining both external and internal heterogeneity.
- v. **Analysis:** The finished themes were examined in light of political comedy, crisis communication, and digital resistance theories.
- vi. **Coding:** By finding initial patterns, codes were created. The analysis stays in line with the goals of the study by focusing on how these memes: (1) convey specific themes regarding the Pahalgam incident; and (2) serve as instruments of digital resistance in times of fear and danger.

5.2 Few Selected Memes



Pahalgam Incident & Memes



5.3 Ethical Consideration

Even though Instagram makes memes publicly accessible, anonymity and informed portrayal were given ethical attention. The study does not reveal sensitive personal information or identify private individuals. Regarding the intellectual and creative expressions of content providers, every picture analysed was by fair use guidelines.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1 Theme 1: Satirical Nationalism

This theme explores how social media users in Pakistan used memes to express their opinions and point out Indian Leader Narendra Modi's actions. The meme features a still scene from the Bollywood Film "Phir Hera Pheri" with the face of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi onto the character with the caption "votes hi votes honge" ("There will be only votes"). The meme humorously infers that all these comments and actions by the Modi government are happening for votes. The second meme shows two pictures of Upar Modi and Lower Modi: On the left side Prime Minister Modi's upper body in formal attire ("Upar Modi") while on the Right side, A woman's lower body in tight white pants and sandals ("Lower Modi"). This meme is a direct critique of the Modi government and his perception of Power as well as remarks about Pakistan.

Another meme was created in response to the news "India has suspended Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan" with a caption above that news, "Paani pawein rok do, Sonam Bajwa G ki reels nahi rukni chahei please" ("Stop the water if you must, but please don't stop Sonam Bajwa's Instagram reels."). The Indus water treaty is a serious matter but here in Pakistan, the memes respond to it with Humor as an element of hostility portraying how digital satire becomes a coping mechanism while dealing with a political crisis. Since comedy enables users to voice disapproval without resorting to direct conflict, this concept is consistent with digital resistance. One of the Indian social media users posted Narendra Modi's picture with the caption "Pakistan I am telling you our leader is serious now" and in response, the meme was created, with the text "Koi baat nai sehat card pe muft ilaaj

kara denge, hojayega theek”(No worries we will get him treated on Sehat Card, he will be fine).

Sarcasm and Satire are major elements used in this meme implying that the leader needs mental health treatment, not political attention. Instead of reacting with fear and tension, this meme narrates digital resistance. Another meme states “When a baby is born in India, ismay bi Pakistan ka hath hoga” This is criticism of the Indian government as they often hold Pakistan responsible for whatever happens there, no matter what the situation is they blame Pakistan for that. Another meme that went viral was the picture of the famous historical place of India Tajh Mahal with superimposed banners in Urdu on its walls featuring “Mardana Taqat (male potency) and goat selling common sights on walls in many parts of Pakistan.” With Soon written on it. In another meme, the Taj Mahal was shown in Green color with the text “Taj Mahal under Bappa Jani”. Bappa Jani is often associated with authoritarian figures and political leaders in Pakistan.

6.2 Theme 2: National Pride through Humour

A considerable number of memes devised a narrative of ongoing resistance and national pride with Humor. These memes are rich in cultural references and visual metaphors that resonate with Pakistani audiences. One of the memes features a picture of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan with the text “Ab tak chapli kabab ban gaya hota apna agar hamara boy na hota paida” (Translation: He would’ve been turned into chapli kabab by now if our boy hadn’t been born). This meme expresses national pride and patriotism through humorous administration. Another meme used a Bollywood movie scene in the male character's face was edited with Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman's face, he is shown fearful and uttering something to women, meme has the text “Darwaza mat kholna” (Don’t open the door), Pakistani memers hai, memes bana k zaleel kerne aye hai” (It’s Pakistani meme makers, they’re here to mock us with memes). This meme was created remembering Abhinandan's past capture and release in 2019 during an airstrike incident. This clearly shows that memes in Pakistan were used as a tool of mockery, satire, sarcasm, hostility, and digital resistance.

6.3 Theme 3: Emotional Catharsis and Digital Solidarity

The memes function as an expressive emotional medium of fear and anger by fusing elements of comedy and aggression. This was particularly obvious in memes that discuss substantial political issues by using amplified scenarios or introspective comedy. When an Indian social media user commented “Indus water treaty agreement with Pakistan cancelled, ab pani kaise piyoge?” (How will you drink water now?) In response meme with a picture of a man drinking from a huge water bottle Aesay" (Like this) went viral.

Memos narrated that whatever the situation, Humor, satire, and digital resistance are firm digital weapons against the hostility of Indian social media users and the government. Pakistanis are not worried about war or the cancelation of the water treaty instead they regain digital control through Humor. A man sitting on a wheelchair with the caption “ I stand with India” is an ironic juxtaposition, One picture of an Indian political leader pleading with folded hands and a stressed face with the text “Band karo main haath jod ke aapse gujarish karta hun” (Please stop it, I request you), another meme with pictures of tea, crispy paratha and omelette with the text “Quetta Cafe Mumbai” coming soon while other a scene from famous Bollywood movie *Mughal e Azam* with the text “Jaldi say uth kar naha lo, paani jaanay wala hai” went viral as Pakistani were not fearful of the situation rather they were showing digital resistance and by meme they were doing catharsis and digital solidarity.

A lot of memes went viral when the Indian government announced they would start war in response to the Pahalgam incident, in response to that, Humor was used as digital resistance and hostility. One meme features the face of a boy with depression expressing and overlaying “Light nhe are, jang liyh kpray bi ready krnay hain”(There’s no electricity, and I still have to iron clothes for war) while on the other hand meme with picture “Jang ka suntay he meray ghar waloun ne safaiyaan shuru kar di hain. Inko mauqa chahiye.”(As soon as my family heard about war, they started cleaning the house. Another was “India pani khol dou meri ankh main sabun chala gaiya hn”, other featured Pakistani Political leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's picture with

the text “Ya Allah parosiyo ko funny kr day. Ameen”(Oh Allah, please make our neighbours funny)

They just needed an excuse.) This shows how the people of Pakistan are handling geopolitical news and tension. Mockery in memes started in response to Indian media news that they have started an airstrike on Pakistan, in response Memes on social media mock their fake news as Mr. Bean with the text “Yaar waise jume k namaz k bad aajane chahye india k jahaz sham ko PSL b dekhna e”, in the same way, the scene from the song of Pasuri by Ali sethi “ Ana si oo dhe aiya” with the text “ India walon ka jahaz” went viral with Humorous meme implying that Pakistan is not threatened from Indian aircraft, another meme was An Indian comment on Indian fighter jet with “It’s time to use these monsters Modiji” in response Pakistani meme featuring “Madini man riding a bicycle modified to look like a fighter jet, decorated in green and white, with flags and religious slogans” with the text “You will be dealt accordingly” functions as a digital satire

Memes provided a platform for expressing emotions from grief and rage to hope and satire. Even in the face of unadorned political pressures, these posts gave Pakistani users a way to express their emotions and raised solidarity by employing Humor and satire. Users were often able to tackle sensitive issues with a blend of Humor and resilience through the use of visual metaphors and textual punchlines.

The results show how these viral memes particularly after the Pahalgam incident serve as a kind of digital resistance by:

- a. Incorporating humorous content so that shared understanding can be cultivated.
- b. Using comedy as a weapon against perceived oppressors to challenge established power structures.
- c. Humour and Hostility both serve as a tool for political criticism and as a mechanism for psychological stress.

7. Discussion

Memes have transformed into a powerful digital communication tool in today’s connected world. It catalyses political opposition, societal criticism,

and emotional expression. Therefore, meme values extend beyond just amusement. Memes give individuals, predominantly young people a unique and exceptional approach to interact with complex themes and context in a clear and understandable way considering memes are simple to make circulate and comprehend.

In the context of the Pahalgam incident, the results of this study reveal the complex and diverse role memes play in digital resistance. Memes serve as an influential tool of societal expression. Memes contribute to forming a collective digital community at times of conflict, especially during the Pahalgam incident. By allowing people to express their feelings, such as annoyance, anger, or hope memes foster harmony among like-minded people and reinforce movements on digital media.

Fundamentally, the findings propose that memes are stated as a collective coping strategy at times of war, there was no tension and fear among Pakistanis. Memes support people in expressing their desolation, resentment, and optimism in a scenario where open political criticism can be hazardous. Humour is usually paired with infuriation aids in promoting harmony and reducing psychological stress. Memes are a kind of political participation that blends resistance with satire. They enable social media users to challenge power and express their views in Humour. These memes serve to reassert Pakistani pride by resisting the dominant

Indian narrative on social media with proper responses back in the form of memes with Humour and hostility. Memes prove to be an instrument in geopolitical commentary as Humour becomes a powerful tool of digital resistance. Furthermore, memes are "weapons of the weak", the use of visual metaphors and coded language helps it to get over censorship. Memes permit indirect critique as comedy becomes a kind of resistance and resiliency in this digital space.

The study reveals that memes following the Pahalgam incident are much more than digital artifacts. These culturally rooted expressions use Humour, politics, and emotion at the same time to question power structures, express disagreement, and foster solidarity.

8. Conclusion & Future Directions

Using thematic analysis this study examined Pakistani Instagram memes relating to the Pahalgam tragedy and found three main themes: Satirical Nationalism, National Pride through Humour, Emotional Catharsis, and Digital Solidarity. According to the findings, memes are more than just amusing posts for entertainment in the digital age, they are influential instruments for identity building, emotional dispensation, and socio-political participation. By analysing these memes, the study explains how common people use sarcasm, comedy, and visuals in response to complex political landscape discussions. It also highlights how social media functions as a forum for participation where different user and their generated political discourse can merge. Memes enable citizens to express their hostile feelings while hiding behind Humour gives them their strength. This study emphasizes that online memes serve as political discourse and influence public opinion in times of crisis.

This study reveals that online memes are more than just jokes they are also strategic instruments of digital resistance that affect public opinion in ways that traditional media cannot. The pressure and stressful situation was tried to be created on social media by Indian social media users and by their media by posting fake news was digitally retaliated by the use of Humour as a major element in responding.

Future researchers can study how these online resistance tactics change depending on the platform and political setting. The study adds to the literature on how social media users use innovative digital technologies to fight against hostility and fear with Humour as expression.

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