

**Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Internet Memes as Tools of Political Communication and Criticism: A Pakistani Perspective on Donald Trump Memes during the U.S.-Iran Conflict**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the nature of memes used online to express political sentiment and criticism related to Donald Trump during the conflict between Iran and the United States as well as after the bombing of the Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025. The analysis is conducted from a Pakistani perspective as Pakistan historically has ties to Iran geographically, diplomatically, economically, and emotionally. A qualitative analysis of 10 publicly available meme images was conducted using multimodal resources (visuals and text) to explore how memes developed from shared online content communicate messages about war, leadership, law, media spectacle, historical cycles of conflict, economic insecurity and distrust in the government. The research indicates that memes act as compressed forms of political argumentation by making personal accusations, illustrating inconsistencies in behaviour, using humour to alleviate fear and converting geopolitical crises into public commentary that can be easily shared. This research finds that memes are not just distractions from politics but they provide insight into how digital publics construct meaning around global conflicts as a result of their multimodal nature.

**Keywords:** Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Internet Memes, Donald Trump, Iran, Political Communication, Pakistan, Social Media, Political Criticism

**Introduction**

Online memes have emerged as a pervasive form of political expression in today's digital public space. Political memes consist of short, visual, humorous representations that are easy to replicate and typically lacking direct attribution; however, simplicity does not equate to fragility. Political memes can encapsulate a complex political discourse into a single image, a few words, and a cultural reference. Political memes also can bridge entertainment and propaganda during the tumultuous events of war, diplomatic crisis, or national anxiety, thus becoming an avenue by which citizens understand authority, critique authority, express apprehension, and form shared collective beliefs. This article explores how memes can be used to communicate politically and criticize political authorities through a multimodal discourse analysis of Donald Trump-related memes that were created during the U.S.-Iran conflict in June of 2025, during which time Trump

ordered airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, and social media reacted with “WW3,” anti-war, and anti-hypocrisy memes.

This study is entitled “A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Internet Memes as Tools for Political Communication and Criticism.” The first aspect to be considered is that memes are multimodal. They consist not only of language but also of image, layout, colour, typography, gesture, intertextual reference, platform conventions and audience memory. For example, a meme about Trump and Iran could contain Trump’s face, a button indicating a war has begun, and the screenshot of a tweet, in addition to the suggested caption associated with the video game and/or some form of parody label. These modes do not function independently, but create meaning through the actions/interpretations that occur when the viewer reads all of the elements together. The second aspect to be considered is that memes are discursive, since they do not merely reflect politics; they are also an agent of producing political meanings. Through memes, leaders are perceived as reckless or hypocritical, confused, funny, dangerous or unserious. Likewise, when viewed in this manner, citizens have also been framed as either being fearful, exhausted, cynical or resistant. Memes thus assist in the political communication process by providing an emotional language for translating a political decision made by the elite into an emotional language that is understood by many people.

The author believes that Pakistan's perspective is important to this topic because of the close proximity of the two nations. Many historical events surround the relationship between Iran and Pakistan, such as land borders between the two nations, cultural ties established through religion, economic ties with the U.S. and the Gulf, and a large Pakistani population with connections to many conflicts throughout the Middle East. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pakistan publicly denounced the attacks by the U.S. on Iranian nuclear facilities on June 22, 2025, expressed concern over the possible escalation of these tensions, and concluded that diplomacy in accordance with the UN Charter was the most appropriate means of resolving issues. In addition, just hours before making this statement, the Pakistani government had publicly nominated Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his work in de-escalating the India-Pakistan conflict, a clear contradiction between the diplomatic statements. In other words, for people in neutral countries such as Pakistan, the essence of the U.S.-Iranian exchange, and the related memes about Donald Trump, contain allusions to political stability, anti-war sentiment, energy security, U.S. dominance, and challenges to the legitimacy of international law.

The nature of the digital marketplace in Pakistan creates unique opportunities for the development of meme politics. According to DataReportal, there are 116 million internet users in Pakistan in January 2025, with 66.9 million social media accounts registered, 190 million mobile (cellular) phones, and robust user bases on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

While they do not suggest every citizen engages equally with political meme culture, this data indicates online platforms are significant examples of community communication about public matters. Facebook is still a vital place to find political pages and share within communities; Instagram and its reels’ culture are becoming increasingly significant to urban youth; TikTok has emerged as a strong vehicle for humour and commentary on politics in short form; and WhatsApp provides an avenue for the circulation of screenshots among family members and friends.

Memes that originally appeared on X, Facebook, Instagram or Reddit may be viewed and re-shared by users all over the world in a matter of minutes or hours on all other digital platforms (regardless of their origins). The medium from which a meme originates becomes secondary to the incredibly fast-paced, Cross-platform nature of meme culture.

The way that multimodal resources are being used to express criticism of military action against Iranian interests will be an analysis of the second objective. The third objective is to analyze how these memes construct meanings in relation to war, leadership, legality, fear, economic burden, media spectacle and public distrust.

A third goal of this research is to interpret these meanings from a Pakistani lens and explore how audiences based in Pakistan might experience humour connected to their own contextual experiences of U.S. foreign policy, regional conflict, public distrust, and the digital milieu. Some questions guiding the study include: what is the interplay between the visual and the verbal in Trump-Iran memes; what types of political critique do Trump-Iran memes deliver; how are concepts of war and of leadership framed through these memes; what type of emotion do these memes elicit; how is it possible for audiences in Pakistan to interpret Trump-Iran memes vis-à-vis Pakistan's diplomatic stance, social media habits, and regional vulnerability?

The significance of this study rests with the objective of treating memes as valid objects of scholarly examination, while engaging with them as humorous objects. Formal elements of political discourse have typically been limited to speeches, news articles, public statements by politicians, parliamentary debates, and official documents issued in diplomatic relations. While these will all continue to be important sources of information regarding political issues, they alone do not constitute a comprehensive picture of political communication; unfortunately, a large portion of young people experience politics relative to and through memes, reels, comments, and screens.

### **Literature Review**

To Understand How Memes Create Meaning, A Multimodal Discourse Analysis is Helpful. Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that Images Have Their Own Grammar; Composition and Visual Choices Consider Gaze and Framing as well as the Modality of the Image. Machin and Mayr Extend This Work into the Realm of Critical Discourse Analysis by Examining How Images Conference Amide Ideology. In Memes, These Visual Choices Are Contents Based but Are Still Elements of Normal Groupings.

The big button with the letters “WW3” on it stands out in an obvious way because it takes up your visual attention; the image of a leader’s face becomes the face of agency; the screenshot-style layout communicates an immediacy to social interaction; and finally, seeing the familiar television “set” provides you with a built-in emotional response to what you are viewing. Rather than looking at each of these factors on their own (e.g., through captioning), we can understand how these facets work together through the lens of multimodal analysis.

Political memes often interrogate or bring into question the power relations within the political system (see Fairclough for an example). Politically, memes often delegitimize political figures, highlight contradictions, provide alternative narratives to 'official' discourse, and can provide an avenue for the representation of different viewpoints regarding those in power. For example, during the U.S.-Iran conflict, there were many instances where official discourse about the U.S. operations could be interpreted as having been successful, a deterrent, or in defense of the U.S. However, memes reframed the same moment as being reckless, hypocritical, or entertaining or a form of political failure (i.e., lack of adherence to U.S. Constitution). It is important to note that the difference in the way that official versus popular framing of these instances occurs is essential in understanding that memes may provide platforms (electronic or otherwise) for critique of ruling regimes.

Furthermore, research conducted by scholars of digital humour shows that humour can serve as a vehicle for the expression and enumeration of feelings related to fear, grief, and uncertainty. In a discussion presented by Vox, after the killing of Soleimani and an influx of "World War III" memes, many such memes portrayed an anxiety regarding potential military draft and an absurdity of young people going to war.

Wired noted too that following the 2020 drone strike, internet users created countless humorous posts and videos speculating about the potential for another world war. This type of joking shouldn't be mistaken for something less than serious if they serve to convey some overwhelming

event in an acceptable manner. While some of the jokes about WW3 may seem to trivialise war, they could also give the user an opportunity to share their fear in a way that their peers will understand.

There is a specific meme history of the U.S. and Iran conflict. Know Your Meme shows that World War III memes gained renewed popularity in January 2020 following the assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani; it was at that point where terms related to the two would-be conflicting countries, such as “WW3” and “WWIII”, began to trend heavily. Both Trump and Soleimani had also exchanged meme-like comments through references to pop-culture (Game of Thrones) prior to the killing. Business Insider and the Washington Post pointed out how Trump’s post featuring the phrase “sanctions are coming” in the context of Soleimani’s death added relevance to the images of the geopolitical conflict seen through the lens of internet aesthetics. This context is important to understanding how 2025 Trump-Iran memes were not created from thin air; they used the same archetypes of WW3 fear, PR events and war as entertainment and culture.

According to studies from Pakistan as well as analyses and critiques of memes, memes play an important role in political satire, party competition, and public dissent. Therefore, on social media, Pakistanis frequently use a mix of Urdu, Roman Urdu, English, regional humour, references to television shows, cricket analogies, religious terminology, and class-based humour in their memes. Users are able to express their opinions quickly and indirectly via memes about their leaders, political institutions, and crises facing Pakistanis. Thus, this meme environment has made it very easy for users in Pakistan to understand memes from other countries' political situations. For example, a meme of Donald Trump pushing a button to start a war can be interpreted based on local experiences of leader-centric politics; a meme demonstrating constitutional procedures can be understood based on Pakistani discussions of institutional governance; and a meme illustrating economic costs can be understood based on inflation experienced by many Pakistanis every day versus potential debt and financial viability.

The literature also identifies the ambivalence associated with memes. On the one hand, memes can create an accessible method for the general population to express political views, while on the other hand, memes have also been able to distribute false information, propagate stereotypes against certain communities, trivialise the impact of suffering, and oversimplify complex conflicts into simplistic humour. The aforementioned effects of memes as part of the U.S.-Iran-Pakistan continuum are critical to political, religious, and anti-American sentiments, misinformation, sectarian identity, and regional alliances. Thus, a thorough analysis of a meme must include both the positive and negative aspects of the meme's critical content. In the article "The Role of Memes in Developing Nations" by A. Kamran Rasheed in 2010, the author discussed these issues:

### **Research Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative research design using multimodal discourse analysis to find ways in which certain memes communicate political meaning through combining: image + text + layout + intertextuality + platform style. The goal of the study is to not quantify counts of viewers, shares, or engagement with memes, but rather to understand and analyze the meanings created by the memes. A qualitative approach is effective because meaning-making is at the core of this project. All memes are studied as cultural texts sensitive to argumentation, emotion, and ideology. The study uses an interpretive approach by creating a consistent system for analyzing each meme via: a) Description of visual elements; b) Encoding/decoding of verbal messages; c) Nature of interrelations between verbal and visual elements; d) Nature of political commentary or critique in visual and verbal messages; e) Nature of emotive tone or energy expressed in memes; and f) Coverage provided by media to contextualize memes in Pakistani culture.

The data corpus used for this study consists of ten selected Trump-related memes (or US-Iran conflict-related) meme images published during the June 2025 Iran bombing meme wave. These ten images were obtained through public access (e.g., through Twitter) from a viral meme report by the Daily Dot, which documented multiple viral memes created by social media users to provide public perspective about Trump's order to bomb Iran. Other contextual information regarding the development of each meme was also gathered from the Daily Dot.

The emojis, tweets and memes of Trump's anti-Iranian war message, the statement of the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Reuters' news coverage of Pakistan's reaction, The Data Reportal report on digital statistics in Pakistan, and various other background information related to memes about World War III have been compiled as a purposive set of data rather than a random accumulation of data. The selection of memes is based upon how strongly related they are to the Trump/Iran/war-escalation/public distrust/constitutional critique/media spectacle/economic-uncertainty relationship.

The user(s) of my study requested only public memes posted on either Facebook or Instagram. One note on methodology — it is often very difficult for an outside observer to verify a public post that was made on Facebook or Instagram due to login walls, private resharing, algorithmic feeds, and lack of public indexing. Therefore, the analysis in this article does not claim back the ability to independently demonstrate that a single image circulated on the same specific private Facebook or Instagram account. While it is true that some images within the analysis cannot be definitively proven to have been published publicly through some private platforms, the analysis treats categorical selections of the images as instances.

Specifically, examples of these image types demonstrated by memes that travel across all platforms including Facebook, Instagram, X, Reddit, TikTok, and WhatsApp. Because many Pakistani users receive memes in the form of a screen shot that lacks an association to the platform they received it from.

Given the limitations described above, we recognize that we are not able to make unverifiably true claims of circulation in this analysis.

The framework used to analyze the memes is multimodal discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. The visual mode is comprised of (1) facial expression, (2) source of image, (3) degree of emphasis, (4) colour, (5) object symbolism, (6) composition, and (7) use of reaction images. The verbal mode is made up of (1) captions, (2) labels, (3) puns, (4) hashtags, (5) quotations, and (6) irony. The modality of the platform will include (1) screenshot format, (2) profile layout, (3) repostability, and (4) associated feelings of immediacy in using social media interfaces. Intertextuality will be reviewed due to the fact that many memes are built upon prior knowledge of (1) television shows, (2) video games, (3) previous wars, (4) political slogans, or (5) existing meme templates. From a critical standpoint, the meme will be evaluated in terms of which power structure it is critiquing - i.e., whether it is critical of Trump as leader, the government of the United States, military decision-making, partisan media, constitutional process, economic priorities, or public trust.

Data analysis will take place in four stages. The first stage will be to describe literally each meme so that the visual and verbal elements can be determined. The second stage will interpret the relationship between the words and the images. The third stage will identify the political critique in the meme. In the fourth stage, the meme will be discussed from a Pakistani viewpoint by examining how the meme's meanings may relate to Pakistan's location in the world, its diplomacy, its culture of social media, and its public issues. There is no assumption of one "correct" reading of the memes. Memes have multiple meanings; some people can read the memes completely differently based on

The study uses publicly available images for scholarly evaluation and attributes the sources of the images to the original creators, where appropriate, including any social media posts from which the images are taken. The images will be reproduced only as an example to demonstrate the research and are not meant to depict an endorsement of any of the claims or language contained within the memes. Many of the memes in this study contain hyperbolic statements, profanity, and/or dark humour. These characteristics are treated as part of a broader context of political discourse and are not removed from the context in which they exist. The study does not make any claims as to whether or not all memes represent the views of all Pakistanis, all Americans, or any factual statement with respect to the conflict. The purpose of the study is to provide an analysis of how memes construct reality, rather than to determine the accuracy of each meme. This differentiation is significant because political memes often combine elements of fact, emotion, parody, and/or persuasion.

### Corpus Overview

The table below summarises the ten meme examples used in the analysis. The purpose of the table is to show the dominant political theme of each meme before the detailed multimodal reading.

No.	Short label	Dominant modes	Main political criticism
1	WW3 button	Trump image + button label + caption	Impulsive militarism and spectacle
2	The Office / MAGA confusion	TV template + labels + wordplay	Contradiction between domestic populism and foreign war
3	Truth Social constitution	Text-post interface + irony	Platformisation of war-making and constitutional bypass
4	Bush Light	Brand parody + Trump/Bush intertext	Historical repetition of Republican Middle East war politics
5	Reality show host	Text-post screenshot	Celebrity politics and partisan media influence
6	2002/2025 repetition	Comic-book image + historical comparison	Political amnesia and repeated war patterns
7	COD stats	Gaming reference + reaction image	Gamification of war and youth anxiety
8	Debt and war	Reddit style + game image	Economic contradiction and repeated conflict
9	No explanations	Reaction image + overlaid text	Distrust of official war justifications
10	U.S. govt. don't got me	State symbol + reversed meme template	Citizen distrust and institutional abandonment

### Data Analysis

In this chapter, we detail our results from analyzing 10 memes. Each meme is analyzed independently; the specificity of each meme helps illustrate how multimodal choices are utilized to create political criticism. The analysis of the memes produced five common themes. The first theme is that Trump serves as a personalized agent of war (e.g., reference to him through images, references to Truth Social, reality TV, and MAGA politics). The second theme is that war is portrayed as spectacle, game, brand or script rather than a reasoned, rational government policy. The third theme is that much of the current expression of distrust against the U.S. government, official explanations, and institutional accountability can be found in these memes. The fourth

common theme relates to economic anxiety resulting from the issues of debt, the prioritization of welfare, and the costs incurred by pursuing another war in the Middle East. Finally, each meme includes a reading of its content from a Pakistani perspective because Pakistan's regional proximity and historical diplomatic ties to the U.S.-Iran conflict mean that the consequences of the escalation of hostilities between the U.S. and Iran are a local, rather than distant, concern. The following images are treated as a small qualitative corpus and are not to be interpreted or understood as a statistical sample of all memes regarding Trump and the situation in Iran. Their value lies in the demonstration of how each template uses different forms of criticism towards Trump, the U.S. government, and the broader media / political climate. Overall, these meme discourses demonstrate that during times of conflict their discursive nature does not adhere to traditional norms of producing original content; they are reflective of social trends within their cultural context.

### **Meme 1: Trump and the WW3 button**

When nobody shows up to your sad little birthday parade



*Meme 1. Trump shown near a blue “WW3” button after the Iran bombing. Source: Daily Dot compilation of viral Iran bombing memes, attributed there to @TommySiegel/X.*

The initial image, or meme, of Donald Trump is made up of an iconic human button related to the U.S.-Iran conflict. The overall visual structure is basic but powerful politically: It is an image of Trump behind (or next to) a giant blue button labelled "WW3" and, in conjunction with its accompanying text, has some degree of public embarrassment connected to it. In terms of multimodal semiotics, this meme operates in relation to gaze, position, colour and label. Trump's expression is one of seriousness and frowning, the button is oversized in relation to his facial features, and its text dictates the expected response. Had there been no label, the image could have depicted a leader deciding on anything; however, once the label is added, the imagery is used to make a statement regarding impulsive (militaristic) behaviour and decisions made by leaders. The button serves as a metaphor for Presidential power, being reduced to pushing the button. Once a President has pushed the button, decisions regarding militarism (which would otherwise require legal and diplomatic considerations, as well as human costs) are made in the same manner as turning on a TV for entertainment purposes.

This meme also has particular significance for Pakistan (due both to their position geographically and within the international community). Pakistan has felt the repercussions of the decisions that Washington and the Middle East have made time and again. Pakistan is close to Iran and shares a common border with Iran, through the province of Balochistan; thus, they constantly receive

energy through vulnerable regional channels for energy imports. A large portion of the Pakistani population exhibit support for Palestine, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The War on Terror, the use of drones, and confusion about how the United States defines powers are examples of how great powers describe to elites and ordinary people differently about their security experiences. The meme critiques the President, Donald Trump, by creating an individualised frame for the crisis in terms of how all of these institutions, the United States State Department, United States Congress, United States Military Command Structure, and International Law are represented through one identifiable person. Yet this is a common way of representing complex systems as pictorial icons in internet memes since they have the capacity to express underlying structures much more efficiently and effectively than written words. The footage of Donald Trump as the primary agent performing the action captures that action's name in text form and provides the audience with a licence to laugh while being afraid of increased violence. In Pakistan, the compression of complex entities into one individual has a strong potential for influence when people are accustomed to seeking humour in local political issues that often represent systemic problems through one individual, such as the prime minister, general, judge, journalist, or political party leader. Therefore, the meme is not simply an anti-Trump statement; it is an anti-spectacle, anti-impulse, and anti-war statement. The results of this study also show how the internet meme can convert foreign policy from an abstract entity to an object that can be understood emotionally by converting an abstract increase in violence to a concrete visual representation of violence.

**Meme 2: The Office template and the shift from deportation to deployment**



*Meme 2. “MAGA” appears confused as the topic shifts from mass deportation to deployment of troops in Iran. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @TiffanyFong\_/X.*

The creator of this meme has put the acronym for Donald Trump’s Presidential Campaign “MAGA” on one of the characters in the Office, and “Trump” on another. The two characters illustrate a dramatic shift in political expectations through their facial expressions and the overall sequence in the sitcom. The first part of the joke utilizes a play on words, where the “MAGA” character appears happy and smiling when the first frame ends. Then, the second frame completes

the word “mass deportation,” a concept associated with Trump and his base of supporters, by completing it as “Mass Deployments of US Troops” to Iran. The two visual modes of a face of delivery and narrative time, along with the written mode of text, provide the ideological switch. The facial expression of the MAGA character changes from happy to unsure, representing a transitioning from an ideology based primarily upon domestic nationalism to one based on escalating Military actions abroad, which is where this meme derives its argument.

In Pakistan, this meme can be viewed in relation to the long-standing view that United States election slogans suggest a commitment to non-intervention, domestic renewal, and restraint. However, when compared to the continued presence of the US Military in the Middle East, this view can be extended to the belief that this was not what was presented to the People of Pakistan. They understand the disconnect between what is said by Politicians, and what Politicians will do when they are in a position to conduct Foreign Military Operations.

Just as you can look at the disconnect between the promises made from Populists, and the Foreign Policy actions taken in a Geopolitical context. Additionally, this meme could also reflect the Political Culture of Pakistan, given that no matter what Political Party an Individual may support, they will always defend that Party Leader until the Party Leader takes action against him or her.

### **Meme 3: “No war shall be declared except through Truth Social”**



**Andrew Fleischman**   
@ASFleischman

**Follow**



**the constitution is very clear no war shall be  
declared except through an announcement  
on truth social a few minutes after an attack**

*Meme 3. A text-based meme mocks the use of Truth Social-style announcements for military action. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @ASFleischman/X.*

Despite the fact that the third meme is almost entirely made up of text, it is still multimodal in that it uses the medium of a social media post and imitates an actual social media interface (i.e., using a tweet-style format, including a profile name, handle, and follow button). The sentence contained within the meme states that the "Constitution is clear that [there can be no] declaration [of War] except by a President announcing it via Truth Social 5 minutes after an attack on the United States." The humor in the third meme stems from its use of parodying legalese. A Constitution is expected to establish a degree of formality, separation of powers and democratic accountability. On the other hand, Truth Social is representative of personal branding, fast delivery, and being directly addressed by a public figure or politician. By equating two different forms of expression in the third meme, the author creates a satirical effect.

The third meme has additional significance to Pakistan in that constitutionalism and executive power are two contentious areas of disagreement among citizens of Pakistan. Citizens of Pakistan are familiar with arguments about the proper authority to take action, whether institutions are following the established processes for taking action, and whether important decisions made by the state are made through established formal procedures, or through the performance of an individual outside of established formal procedures. Therefore, it can reasonably be assumed that this meme has a broader impact than only an American context: it criticizes the platformization of state power; the increasing tendency for the making of state decisions to occur first as social media posts, video clips, slogans, etc., or as leader-centered statements of individual leaders instead of during parliamentary deliberations. Just as viewers in the United States are increasingly seeing political dramatizations of governmental action in social media and other political media performances.

#### **Meme 4: “Bush Light” and historical comparison with Iraq-era politics**



*Meme 4. Trump’s face placed on a “Bush Light” beer-style label, comparing the Iran strike moment with Bush-era Middle East war politics. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @ettingermentum/X.*

The brand parody in this meme uses the face of Donald Trump on the can of Bud Light beer, as well as a pun on the name of former President George W. Bush, creating a visual relationship between the two. While the meme is visually simple, it creates an extensive historical argument by combining the imagery of two presidents in order to draw parallels between the military and political strategies of the early 2000’s and the current strategy being used to justify military action against Iran in the 2025 strike on Iran. By merging the image of Donald Trump and George W. Bush, the implication is that the 2025 strike against Iran is similar to the decisions and logic of the early 2000’s regarding the War in Iraq and/or the War on Terror due to the use of Republican leadership, military action in the Middle East, the patriotic language and messages used, and the possibility that the justification of using the military to intervene in the Middle East will be sold with simple, catchy slogans. Additionally, the meme implies that, in this situation, the word “Light” is an indication of a lighter or lesser version of Bush’s militarism.

The historical connotation of the Bush comparison is not merely abstract for the people of Pakistan. Pakistan’s post-9/11 history has been greatly impacted by the U.S. military intervention, in large part, due to the War on Terror which significantly altered the security dynamics within Pakistan; altered the internal power and political relationships, altered the relationship with Pakistan’s border regions, altered the relationships with other nations through the aid being given to each nation. Therefore, a meme linking Donald Trump with President Bush, in defense of the military and political logic being used to justify military action in Iran, will elicit a collective memory for the people of Pakistan regarding the impact to Pakistan militarily, economically, diplomatically or strategically on Pakistan when the people of the United States have stated that military action against another nation/state is necessary. When this occurs, Pakistan is often embroiled in a web of diplomatic, economic, or other assistance.

### Meme 5: “A reality show host and Fox News guests just started WWII”



**Derek**   
@DerekNeverFails

**Follow**



I cannot believe a reality show host and  
Fox News guests just started WWII

*Meme 5. A text-post meme framing war escalation as the outcome of celebrity politics and cable-news influence. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @DerekNeverFails/X.*

This meme is composed of a simple text screenshot, and the main part of the text expresses disbelief that “a reality show host and Fox News guests” would start World War III. The phrase connects three separate discourses together: entertainment celebrity, partisan media, and global war. In addition to critiquing Trump, the meme is also critiquing the media ecosystem that has built up around Trump. The phrase "reality show host" helps to reduce the presidential image to his recreated celebrity identity prior to becoming a politician, as well as to suggest that TV personalities have moved from being opinion-makers on air to having enough power to influence policies through televised commentary. Therefore, the meme is, in essence, a critique of mediatized governance, where lines between TV performance, political advice, and military decision-making become increasingly unclear.

When viewed from a Pakistani perspective, the meme holds great value in explaining the processes of how the media operates and the implication of that process for legitimation, patriotic sentiment, betrayal, and national interest regarding Pakistani politics. Because of the heavy mediatization of what happens in Pakistan regarding politics, the use of television talk shows, YouTube-channel anchors, political influencers, and viral clips, can all impact how the public sees their leaders as legitimate or illegitimate, whether they see themselves as patriotic or not, and whether they view their leader to be betraying them or acting in their best interest. The meme's association of war with TV personalities is a warning that this performance economy has the potential to drive leaders to consider dramatic acts of performance that might lead to armed conflict. In Pakistan, the cause and effect can be quite substantial in terms of how people have debated and discussed issues such as India, Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine and other places.

### Meme 6: “It is 2002. It is 2025.”



**Jeremiah Johnson**    
@JeremiahDJohns



It is 2002. The Republican president pushes military action in the Middle East and tax cuts for the rich. People suspect he is very stupid.

It is 2025. The Republican president pushes military action in the Middle East and tax cuts for the rich. People suspect he is very stupid



*Meme 6. A Dr. Manhattan-style historical repetition meme comparing 2002 and 2025 Republican Middle East policy. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @JeremiahDJohns/X.*

The meme uses an image from Dr. Manhattan as a visually privation figure in solitude upon a desolate and barren planet. It makes reference to both 2002 and 2025—specifically, how both years have seen a United States (U.S.) Republican president, who has pushed for military intervention in the Middle East, as well as tax reductions for wealthy Americans. When these years are compared to one another through the lens of Dr. Manhattan’s philosophy of distance and fatigue in regard to the repetition of experience, spectators are challenged to view their history not as a linear progression of time but instead, as a cyclical return of the same experiences (although experienced differently). In addition, the expanse of the empty land serves to emphasize this view, as each spectator has previously witnessed the same events, albeit at a different level, of their absurd, re-repetition.

There is also a significant relevance to Pakistan with respect to the meme. As part of the political memory of the early 2000s, Pakistan similarly experienced pressure to support the U.S.’s war and military incursions into Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas throughout the Middle East; migration and displacement resulting from the U.S.’s wars, creation of refugee flows due to the U.S.’s wars in the region, creation of security and other multiagency operations; and lastly, balancing their domestic political situation with continued cooperation with Washington to support the U.S.’s military actions (this is a very complex balance). By viewing this meme, observers in Pakistan can draw parallels between the similarities of 2002 and 2025 as well as the continued expectation that a U.S.-centra-based war against the Middle East will repeat and bring with it past similarly negative experiences. Even though Pakistan does not have direct military involvement in the current U.S.-aspired wars in and around the Middle East, the military action of the U.S. takes all non-combatant nations that surround are affected by these conflicts, politically and through negative public manifestation (e.g., protesters). The meme, therefore, does not simply mock U.S. domestic politics; it highlights for South Asian viewers how history can be repeated through our actions.

### **Meme 7: Call of Duty statistics and the fantasy of digital recruitment**



The army looking at peoples COD stats to see who to recruit for WW3



*Meme 7. “The army looking at people’s COD stats to see who to recruit for WW3.” Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @Hoodville\_X.*

This meme 7 links war to gaming, as it presents the army evaluating people's Call of Duty statistics to decide who will be drafted for World War III. The image depicts people staring intensely at a screen, as if to visually depict strategic monitoring or talent scouting. The caption is a humorous way of converting video game results into “militarily acceptable qualifications.” The joke is predicated on the difference between real warfare and virtual combat, implying that a generation who has seen military combat portrayed as fun and entertaining may have a fear of being drawn from virtual simulation to actual warfare.

For Pakistanis, this meme at least partially relates to youth culture and the military positioning of media. Pakistani youngsters have access to the same gaming, memes and reels, as well as war related material, as western youth via the same platforms, yet Pakistanis have a much stronger experience of the army’s role in their national consciousness, given India-Pakistan conflict, the War on Terror and the discourse which surrounds national security. Because of this, this meme creates a connection between two separate domains: online gaming humour and the real potential for war in a region to cause disruption to everyday experience. While many Pakistani viewers laugh at the prospect of gamers being recruited into the army, the laughter comes with a degree of trepidation. This meme exemplifies the larger state of politically aware digital youth who receive their political awareness via mobile phone.

#### **Meme 8: U.S. debt and “here we go again”**



*Meme 8. A Reddit-style meme links U.S. debt with entering another war, using a Trump figure in a game-like scene. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to u/Medium\_Contract4513 via Reddit.*

This meme utilizes the Reddit-style format to express disbelief over both the US debt level surpassing \$37 trillion and at the advent of another US military intervention. The meme uses an avatar resembling President Trump wandering around in an 8-bit video game to communicate the sentiment of “Ah, shit! Here we go again”, a phrase commonly associated with the video game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas and used in online discussions as a reference point for the monotony of a situation. By blending together themes from the military and economic crises and using references from the video gaming world, this meme suggests that the crises are occurring simultaneously and that there is an old pattern of occurrence, not a new one.

In addition to sharing a cultural connection with the US, the meme also relates to the fragility of Pakistan's economy and the ways in which that fragility echoes through the world. Citizens of Pakistan have many layers of concern regarding inflation, price of fuel, performance from the

IMF, devaluation of the currency, and problems associated with instability in their region. As such, when there is conflict with any major power in proximity to the Persian Gulf, citizens of Pakistan generally have concerns about the price of oil, remittances from workers in the Gulf, shipping lanes into and out of the Gulf, and pressure on their government's ability to have a sound foreign policy. The meme's context references US debt, but the message communicates a universal response that countries can create scarcity for citizens for the purpose of welfare, but find the resources to fund wars.

### **Meme 9: Governments no longer explain why war starts**

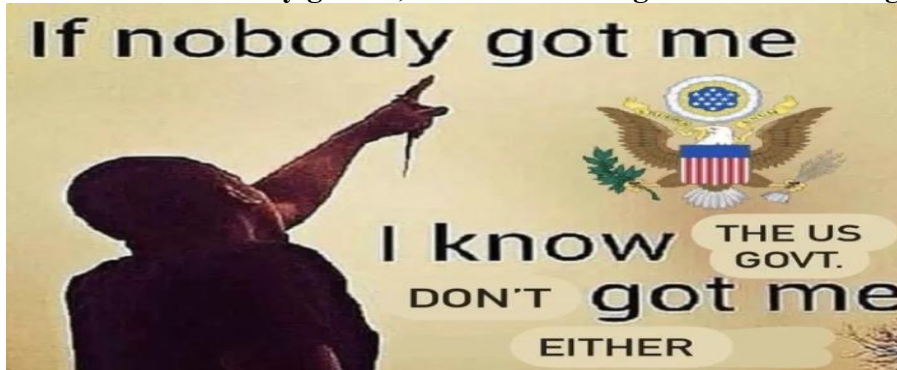


*Meme 9. A reaction-image meme saying governments do not explain why they should start war anymore. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @ShitpostGate/X.*

The ninth meme is a close up reaction pic of an emotionally vulnerable/emotional face with the text overlaid: the government doesn't even try to explain to you any longer why they want to start a war; they just look at you in this way. The humour in this meme comes from the juxtaposition of the seriousness of war and the face displayed in the image as showing a feeling of powerlessness. The meme shows a face that is weak/pleading/absurd instead of showing a powerful leader. This reversal of the expected view of government says that the governments have stopped giving rational reasons for their actions (speeches) and are now only giving you emotional empty (gestures). This meme also represents an example of the criticism of legitimacy fatigue; the audience has heard so many explanations provided to them by their governments that they now presume that their explanation will be inadequate.

In Pakistan, this meme will have significant resonance with its citizens because there is a lot of distrust of the official forms of representing reality and the narratives provided by the government and state's actors. The citizenry connects with multiple different narratives from the government, state actors, foreign [governments], international media, and social media influencers. The narrative confusion [surrounding Pakistan] is made all the more confusing in terms of the history that surrounds war in general and particularly in the context of international conflict. For example, during the U.S.-Iran crisis, while the Pakistani government was condemning U.S. airstrikes and calling for a diplomatic resolution, Facebook users in Pakistan were commenting on the U.S.-Iran crisis primarily through religious, international, and economic concerns, while others commented on the situation through humour and anti-American sentiments.

**Meme 10: “If nobody got me, I know the U.S. government don’t got me either”**



*Meme 10. A meme showing distrust of the U.S. government during the Iran bombing moment. Source: Daily Dot compilation, attributed there to @sarahmazing/X.*

The tenth meme replaces the emotional assurance found in the popular “If nobody got me, I know X got me” by creating an opposite statement of distrust to the U.S. government: “If nobody got me, I know the U.S. didn’t get me either.” The juxtaposition of the silhouette signing upward; the Great Seal; and the revised text create a darkly humorous statement indicating a lack of faith. Whereas comfort was derived from the traditional template of the meme, the revised version suggests feelings of neglect. Contradiction produces the multimodal impact; the traditional representation of national pride is juxtaposed against the republic’s abandonment of its citizenry. The suggested statement, during the Iran War, indicates that regular people do not believe their voice will have an effect on the making of policy decisions regarding the initiation of war.

In regard to content, the meme can function for Pakistani audiences as a critique of U.S. policymaking by its citizenry and, equally, as a broadly relatable expression of the way the traditional decision-making processes of democratic countries exclude the voice of the individual citizen in all parts of the globe. In their own experience of state disconnection, economic hardship, and regional instability, many Pakistanis might relate to the meme’s sentiment. As a result, the meme articulates the complicated relationship between the United States and Pakistan, as many Pakistanis have been exposed to U.S. culture through media consumption, educational systems (both domestic and abroad), and migration; they recognize their differences from the U.S. culture and, yet, could be very much connected to it.

**Finding/ Discussion**

Based on an assessment of the available evidence, it appears that internet memes related to Donald Trump and the U.S.-Iran conflict function as abbreviated political arguments. Although they do not offer a complete analysis of policy, they generate frameworks through which policy is understood emotionally. For example, the “WW3 button” frame illustrates war as being something that is acted upon rather than having been planned in advance. Similarly, the “Office” template presents Trump’s foreign policy as having been a surprise or betrayal to his supporters. On the other hand, the Truth Social meme presents war making as a failure of constitutional processes. The Bush Light meme presents Iran Strikes as having occurred in relation to the history of other Republican-led wars in the Middle East. The Reality Show meme presents the instability in the region as coming from an entertainment-based politics and partisanship in the media. Other frames represent war as a game, a repetition of scripts, an economic contradiction, and an absence of government legitimacy.

From Pakistan’s viewpoint, these frames are important because Pakistan is susceptible to both the symbolic and physical effects of Middle Eastern conflict. The official condemnation by the Government of Pakistan of the U.S. strikes placed emphasis upon issues of international law, civilian protections, and the need for diplomacy. This official discourse has been serious and

formal. Meme discourse has a tendency to be humorous and informal. However, both types of discourse can express concerns about the escalation of conflict. The differences between the two types of discourse are that the official discourse operates at an institutional level while meme discourse exists at an individual level.

An additional aspect of the discussion concerns the links between humour and dread. The memes that were evaluated were humorous due to their use of hyperbole, misdirection, or contradiction; yet, the humour was dark in nature. There was a recurrent theme of WW3 in the text, which indicated a fear or anxiety regarding potential escalation. The jokes made in relation to gaming and recruitment show a fear for youth regarding being involved in conflict. The memes regarding debt and lack of trust in government expressed a fear that ordinary citizens may bear the consequences of decisions made by those on the top. In Pakistan, where foreign conflicts can quickly lead to domestic political and economic problems, the use of dark humour may be a method of coping. People laugh because they cannot stop the actions of their leaders, while they share the laughter of those who share the same level of helplessness.

Finally, the research confirmed that memes can provide criticism toward populist communication strategies. For several years, Trump has been associated with both a political persona based on media performance (using social media to relate directly to the public), branding, reality television and provocation of his critics. The memes used in this research reverse those distinct traits in their depiction of Trump; the memes portray him as either an individual that presses buttons, like a reality show producer or game character, or Bush-like war president. In essence, meme culture has taken the existing media image constructed by the individual and weaponised it against him, which is significant for Pakistani political leaders and political parties. Political image-based power is susceptible to

Pakistan's perspective also addresses the relationship between platform ecology and their online population and social media use which has grown but is also quite disparate. While Facebook and Instagram provide ample audiences, TikTok and YouTube create immense influence, and WhatsApp will continue to be an obligatory means of circulating information privately. The same meme/image shared on X may also appear on Facebook, on an Instagram story, in WhatsApp group chat or on a TikTok slide show. Thus, memes must be studied by researchers as they move as mobile entities rather than remain as fixed platform artefacts. The only limitation of doing so, in determining the verification of memes as circulating on private Facebook or Instagram pages, is not because of the topic; but rather reflects contemporary digital culture.

Moreover, the larger implication of this research is that the understanding of political communication in Pakistan lies in both the formal (government statements, news articles, press conferences and speeches) and informal (memes, reaction images, short videos, jokes and comments). More specifically, in an international crisis, citizens may trust the informal form of communication more than the formal because they view it as more authentic, immediate and close to them emotionally. By contrast, informal forms of communication can also become polarised or misleading; hence, meme analysis should also be included in media literacy.

The examination of memoranda about Trump and Iran indicates that many are not simply humorous items created for an online audience; rather, they serve several other purposes that include representing a specific type of political communication and criticism along with providing a means of translating geopolitical conflict into popular visual language. The memo is representative of an established genre of political criticism that employs political satire as a means of critiquing leaders, questioning procedures, exposing historical repetitions, and mocking the media spectacle; connecting the war to the economic anxiety related to it; and expressing distrust of government. From a Pakistani perspective, these memes are of particular importance due to the regional implications associated with the U.S./Iran conflict and the fact that Pakistani digital publics are actively engaging in cross-platform political humour. The results indicate that they

are an effective means of creating access to, emotionally sharable and critically salient political material, but must be analysed with caution as they often oversimplify the complexity of many political issues. A responsible approach towards meme culture on the part of Pakistanis should neither be dismissive of the usefulness of memes as humorous items nor should it accept them as a source of truth without having first analysed them as multimodal textual representations that express what people think, feel, fear, criticise, and communicate during periods of uncertainty globally.

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