

The Ascendancy of Meme Culture in Pakistan's Information Warfare and Strategic Counter-Narratives

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Abstract:

The processes of digitalization have essentially changed the landscape of strategic competition in modern society, and most of the competition has moved to the large and multidimensional environment of the cyberspace. What has been thought of as harmless online entertainment i.e. internet memes have in practice become advanced tools of psychological interference, of story-making, and even of changing the geopolitical landscape. This discussion explores how the culture of memes may be incorporated into the system of information operation, in the case of the long history of audio-visual noise between India and Pakistan. It has been proposed in theory that memes, which traditionally were premised on entertainment and societal commentary, have come to be intentionally spread outlet, spreading counter-narratives, building national identity, and fighting against unwanted propaganda. The current research paper focuses on understanding how the viral humor of memes can enhance the behavior of Pakistan in the asymmetry of information aspects, which consequently contributes to national unity and strengthening the confidence in the strategies adopted by different states globally. The research clarifies how they spawn the creation of a recreation of the practice of communicating in modern public discourse by examining how they have been incorporated into thematic motifs, mechanisms of their propagation, and the psychological effects they impose with reference to these digital artifacts. An example can be a meme often makes use of satire to illustrate perceived injustices, past injustices, or even military victories, to make the complicated world of geopolitics more palatable and familiar to younger viewers. The followers attracted to social media, including Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and so on, increase the spread of these memes, which is why content developed by the grassroots can afford the creators to challenge the official discourse spread by opponents who are better armed.

Keywords: Meme Culture, Information Warfare, Pakistan, Strategic Communication, Counter-Narratives, Digital Diplomacy, India-Pakistan Conflict, Social Media, Psychological Operations, Hybrid Warfare.

Introduction

Modern information space is remarkable by its speed, amount, and instantaneous effect, and the social media platforms are the major arenas of battle of hearts and minds (Kasi et al., 2021). Here, amidst the overcrowded and competitive domain, both state and non-state actors contend to gain the narrative upper hand, and attempt to infiltrate the domestic publics, international observers, and the populations of the adversary. In the case of Pakistan, a country located in a part of a region of the age old geopolitical conflict, especially with that of its neighbor India, the information

management practice has been a strategic necessity. The old, and state-based, forms of propaganda find it hard to compete in terms of credibility and interaction in a new era characterized by citizen journalism and media consumption in a decentralized form (Kaźmierczak et al., 2025). It is to this space that the internet meme culture has been able to play a prominent and strategic role. Having initially been created as a joke, or even considered ironic, image macros or video clips reposted as collective amusing content, memes have been monetized and their reach and capacity to spread virally and elicit specific emotions have been used to goals of a strategic nature. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of memes used by Pakistan as a tool of information warfare, which it argues that it is a complex kind of grassroots strategic communication. They are not only responses, but proactive measures to construct in response to military show-downs, diplomatic stalemates and cross-border propaganda, and generally to build national identity, resilience and strategic narration against adversarial influence. This study examines the role strategic use of internet memes as a tool of information warfare in the context of geopolitical conflict between Pakistan and India. The question that the study explores is how does meme culture operate as a strategic mechanism of counter-narrative forming in the form of information warfare in the Pakistani context, and what are the thematic, psychological, and tactical functions of memes in shaping the perception of domestic and cross-border watching of the situation of domestic and external tension between India and Pakistan?

Theoretical Underpinnings

In order to determine the strategic value of memes, it would be necessary to first value the nature of memes as cultural units of transmission. Online, a meme is thought or action or way of doing things that is rapidly transmitted through the internet by an individual to another (Britannica, 2025). They are only powerful in their simplicity, emotional touch and reinterpretability. Narratives in the context of war are the narratives which define who we are in war, what we fight about and why we will win. The acts that are developed through strategic narratives are so constructed to influence the perception and behaviors of others, or to justify action or to be able to mobilize support. The memes are mini-stories or bits of narratives. Those reduce in depth geopolitical processes to emotionally appealing, immediately identifiable, and easily distributed parts (Shifman, 2014). A single graphic with words printed on can recap a stance of protest, an act of triumph, or a parody of an enemy position, and at a faster rate and with greater relatability than a state-made press statement. In the case of Pakistan, memes are the carriers that bear a strategic discourse of the resilience, the high ground and the capacity of the nation to retaliate against a bigger foe through its wit and cultural swagger (Ghilzai, 2025). They help generate a message of a united, technologically sophisticated, and psychologically unfazed population, a message that might otherwise incite Indian messages of Pakistan as an isolated and internally vulnerable country.

Literature Review

Historical Context and the Digital Battlefield of India-Pakistan Rivalry

The India/Pakistan conflict is also among the most deeply rooted in the world that is full of struggles over the territorial issues and all-out wars and the unremitting load-level conflict. The field of information has never been a back burned field. This was historic through the state-controlled media, films, and literature. The space was however democratized by the introduction of digital media. After the 2016 Uri attack, the 2019 Balakot airstrikes, and the ensuing aerial action, both sides involved in the traditional media reported fervently and in a nationalistic way (Government of Pakistan Planning Commission, 2025). At the same time, social media turned into what was dubbed by users as a Meme War. This digital clash between the two countries resulted in citizens of the countries creating and sharing memes in their thousands. The memes used in

these moments were Pakistani and had a specific strategic agenda. They tended to reduce the psychological effects of Indian military claims through reconsidering the events through humor and ridicule. An example is the memes that make fun of the alleged ineffectiveness of Indian airstrikes or parody the article of Indian news channels, which served as a mass wave of decentralized mental activity (UrduPoint, 2025). They helped catharsis the Pakistani people by transforming anxiety and tension into group laughter and group resistance, aiding in keeping the morale of domestic people in a high tension scenario.

Methodology

The study is qualitative exploration of a selected sample of twenty viral posts on the social media platform X (previously Twitter) analyzing their contribution to the strategic communication of the Pakistani population. The memes were selected intentionally according to their high engagement rates (shares, likes, and replies) at the time of the acute tension between India and Pakistan. The patterns of the visual rhetoric, narrative structures and emotional appeals incorporated to these X-specific formats are analyzed. The analysis of this focused sample will both detect common thematic motifs and tactical subtleties and demonstrate how the specific culture of immediacy and ability to get viral, inherent in the platform are deployed to create and distribute strategic anti-narratives in real-time.

Results and Findings

Thematic Analysis of Pakistani Meme Warfare

The content of the strategic memes of Pakistan is not by accident, it has discernible themes in line with national security and story goals. The Humiliation and Satire of the Adversary is one of the most common themes (Noor & Arshad, 2024). This includes memes that satirize Indian political leaders or media hysterics. These memes fulfill a psychological task: by lessening a perceived danger to an object of derision, the memes reduce the position of the adversary and create a feeling of superiority in the domestic audience. The other huge theme is Celebration of National stamina and Military prowess (Ahmed, 2025). The symbols included in memes to talk about the Pakistani military capability are usually signs of the JF-17 Thunder aircraft, as well as captions of readiness and victory. They are used as electronic morale boosters which strengthens trust in national institutions. Probably the most culturally different and powerful theme is the theme of Self-Depreciation and Irony. In contrast to state propaganda, which may be many relentlessly optimistic, the Pakistani meme culture has many jokes at the country's own cost- telling jokes on the issues of load-shedding, political unsteadiness, or economic difficulties. This plays a very important strategic role. One, it preempts stories by souring the story on its own to avert criticism by the outsider. Secondly it gains credibility and genuineness with both local and global audiences because it does not look as artificial and implausible as fabricated propaganda but rather, resembles more the face-to-face, grounded civic conversation. Lastly, it bears the perception of psychological fortitude: a self-sufficient nation that can laugh at its own problems in times of crisis is shown as a nation that is hard to break in a psychological sense. The third theme is Construction of Moral and Historical Legitimacy. The memes commonly allude to historical moments such as the 1965 war or the 1971 war, and commonly utilizes a visual metaphor or analogy to fit the present situation into the history of Pakistani defiance and triumph hence providing history that gives context to the events currently happening (Mushtaq, Sohail, & Tahir, 2025).

The Psychology of Conflict and the Role of Humor

The success of memes in information warfare lies in the profound psychology of it. In the era of tension or conflict between states, the publics are full of anxiety, fear and nationalism (Mihăilescu, 2024). Humor as an intervention used by the form of memes is a strong coping behavior. It lessens existential terrorism to manageable absurdity, which promotes in-group solidarity by means of

collective laughter. This psychological process is priceless as far as strategy is concerned. An actively-involved population of humorous counter-narrative is an actively-involved population, that is, an actively-involved population, which is, in any case, submitting to the passive role of passive propaganda, which is fear-based propaganda. This contribution makes one feel a sense of agency and group identity. Moreover, humor does not pass through critical thinking filters (Raza & Khan, 2024). The believability of a simple political message can be undermined, but the fact a meme soaked in humor is consumed as entertainment can lead to the consumption of the underlying message be it that of adversary incompetence, or national unity, being subsequently absorbed without as much resistance. This renders meme warfare a type of soft power invasion, able to go beyond the domestic foothold, but also other neutral observers of the conflict, or a part of the population of the opposing side, which can be vulnerably infected by it to cast misguided faith or neutralize the effect of an official narrative. (Singer & Brooking, 2018).

Mobilization, Dissemination, and the Ecosystem of Digital Patriotism

A decentralized web of civilian users, meme pages, digital activists, and sometimes planned campaigns with implicit or explicit state encouragement are the key drivers of the production and viral spread of these memes. Social meme Pakistani dedicated pages are the digital communities that quickly react to geopolitical events by providing cultural content (Noor & Arshad, 2024). This is a mobilization at the grassroots level. It is a kind of crowdsourced information warfare as the state does not have to create all the content by himself, but may enjoy the benefits of organic production of the digitally literate youth demographic. Organic expression and astroturfing may at times be too thin and in some cases, the campaigns would exhibit some measure of coordination that hints of more organized support (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). The dissemination ecosystem encompasses the all the essential social media, namely, Twitter (which is now X), Facebook, Instagram, and, to their growing popularity, TikTok. This ubiquitous nature is keeping it saturated and customizable content can be offered to various demographics. What it brings is that it creates a closed ecosphere of digital patriotism where making and sharing a meme is a civic duty, a means through which individuals and, more specifically, young people can make an impact on the national story on their smartphones.

Strategic Utility and Implications for Modern Hybrid Warfare

The meme culture in Pakistan has a multipurpose strategic value. To start with, it offers Cost-Effective Asymmetric Advantage. The foe that Pakistan must deal with has better conventional and economic capabilities and, thus, Pakistan can make use of the ingenuity of its high population to conduct a very effective perception campaign at a minimal financial cost. Second, it is facilitating Rapid Response and Agenda-Setting. During the first hours after a major event, when the official statements are still in the process of formation, the meme sphere is overwhelmed with narrative interpretations, as a result of which the first tone of the discussion is established and in many cases puts the opponent on the defensive in the information space. Thirdly, it leads to Domestic Cohesion and Resilience. It gives a common, comedic expression of national feeling, thus reinforcing society in its resistance to environment. Lastly, it makes the information operations of the adversary complicated (Koivukoski, 2022). Any attempt of Indian to strike an image of mightiness or to seclude Pakistan is not received in silence or even with utter angry responses, but with a flood of criticism that may be hard to refute using conventional, serious diplomacy. This phenomenon highlights a larger change of the hybrid warfare where the most prominence is on cognitive and psychological domains. Success is not measured based on the territorial success but by the narrative superiority and the condition of psychological well-being of the Catholic people (Wang et al., 2017). This new reality is manifested in Pakistan, which is

demonstrated by the skillful, but unofficial use of meme culture. It is a mixture of the old time national security agendas and the local flavor and speed of the internet culture.

Challenges, Risks, and Ethical Considerations

The situation of weaponizing meme culture is not without considerable dangers and limitations even though it might seem quite useful. The first one is the Risk of Rhetorical Hostility Escalation. Even with the intent of psychological defense, hyperbolic or extremely offensive memes may feed the sentiments of the crowd on both ends, and may result in a civic mood that limits the ability to bend diplomacy and makes the perceived legitimacy of real-world violence seem more acceptable (French, 2024). The risk of the Blowback and Misinterpretation is also possible. An instance of self-deprecating humor without being contextualized by the international audience that does not practice the cultural practice in a subtle manner may carry negative stereotypes instead of countering it. Moreover, the fact that production is decentralized means that the state does not have complete control over the message; memes that are morally inappropriate, misleading or those that strike on the wrong topics can be created which is harmful to the message unity that the strategy attempts to foster (Georgetown University Law Center Global Law Scholars, 2022). Ethically, the application of humor in case of conflict, which in most times explores viable human emotions borders thin ice. It runs the danger of making the serious issues trivial and dulling the populace to the horrendous nature of war and terror.

Conclusion

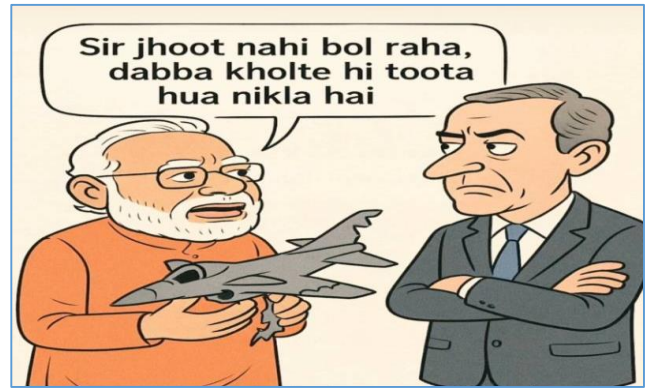
The rise of the so-called meme culture in the information space in Pakistan is an informative adjustment to the requirements of the conflict in the 21st century. It no longer focuses on the digital spaces as a simple dissemination medium but sees it as a real-time battlefield where the narrative is fought over by millions of users. With a combination of satire, resilience, self-irony and patriotism, Pakistani meme warfare has evolved to become an advanced tool of creating strategic counter-narratives to India. It enhances domestic spirit, makes adversary propaganda challenging and gives an image of a people that is interested, united and psychologically coherent. Although it is not a replacement of diplomatic, economic or military power, it functions as a powerful force multiplier in the mental regimes. It shows that in the modern hybrid wars, strategic means are not only arms and treaties but also images, ingenuity, humor, and the ability to influence the perception with the ability to get viral of the digital culture. The skill of successfully utilizing these forms of communication, which are vernacular and emotional, will probably constitute a more vital element of the national strength as information warfare continues to develop. Laughter, shared one meme at a time has come to be a grave defense mechanism, a special kind of strategic expression in an everlasting contention in the case with Pakistan. The limitation of this study is that it is based on only one case study and there are broader case studies that can be explored.

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Appendix:



Raza Ahmadzai · Follow
2h · 🌐

Gotta start saving for a Plot in DHA Mumbai, just in case Army Chief gets serious...

Kashmiri Hun
1h · 🌐

Mai front seat pr beth kr jaunga jang mai wrna mai nahi ja raha..

Syed Zain Raza @MrZainRaza · 19h

Kisi ne shaadi waadi karni hai toh bataado 8 maheene ka hee time diya hai Sidharth bhai ne bas

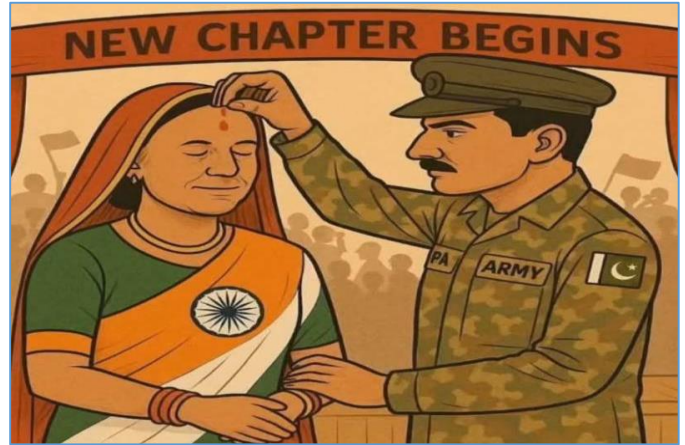
Sidharth @Cloudwatch199 · 1d
Pakistan (1947-2025)

18 133 1.4K 29K

@shutdxwm · 1d
mein rubber hi nahi dunga

Flt Lt Anoop Verma (Ret...) · 2d
Time to erase Pakistan from the map

31 173 2K 37.7K



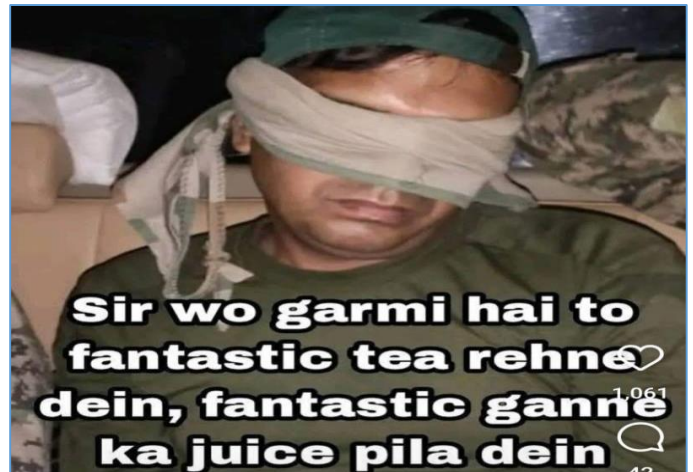
Saadi @SLN18D · May 8

Janabuddin captured in Akhnur
Adaabuddin captured in Jaisalmir

kazmi. @HaayeShabbir · May 8
Just checked with my sources in PAF. One F-16 has been shot down. Pilot Janabuddin urf Adaabuddin now missing.

1 289

Dr. Michael McNaughton @Samosa000 · 20h
Wing Commander **Janabuddin** son of Kababuddin



Syed Zain Raza @MrZainRaza

Ab toh madam Noor Jehan bhi nahin hain. Agar jang hogayi toh Aima Baig ke taraane sunne parenge 😞

ayme. @aymx_infinity

guys war bhi hybrid model pe dubai main hogi ya india iss baar pakistan araha hai?

