

## Impact of Political Memes on Voter Perception: A Case Study of University Students

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to find the impact of political memes on voters' perception by conducting a case study of Government College University, Lahore, targeting university students who use different social media platforms for political meme consumption. The research uses a quantitative methodology by creating a survey on Google Forms. The survey was sent to university departmental groups and also sent in person to students. A sample size of 100 voters aged 18-25 was used, consisting of 63 females and 37 males. A Likert scale was used, and multiple-choice options were also provided. Descriptive statistics (Mean, Median, and standard deviation) and Cronbach's alpha test were also applied, which showed a value of  $\alpha = 0.65$ , indicating reliability for this study. The research focused on knowing whether political memes had any effect on voters' perception, which social media platform was commonly used for political meme consumption, and whether watching political memes makes it easier to understand politics. According to the results, there was a positive association that political memes affect voting perception, Instagram was the most common platform used for meme consumption, and there was a positive association of memes making politics easier to understand. This research study helps in understanding the political memes consumption and voting perception of GCU Lahore students.

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### INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, social media plays an important role because it is not only a source of entertainment but also a source of information as well (Chick, 1999). It has been seen that due to technological advancements, most of the people rely on digital apps for information (Pew Research Center, 2021). These apps are used more frequently and consistently to view political news and get political updates. Political memes are considered to be an important part of political news because they play a major role in influencing the minds of the masses, especially younger generations (Amin & Hussain, 2023). On social platforms like Instagram, approximately 1 million memes are shared daily, showing the importance of memes (Brown, 2022). Memes have also become very popular in Pakistan. It has made it easier for political messages to spread through visuals (Shifman, 2013), and in every serious issue or any fun event, humorous memes have always become viral (Niazi, 2024). Political memes also have an emotional effect on users, which may influence their understanding of politics (Griffin, 2020). So understanding political memes has become a necessity. The term Meme was first proposed by the British Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book "The Selfish Gene," where the context of it was to see how ideas and cultural trends spread. Some researchers consider memes as a type of symbols that have specific meanings just like a language (Cannizzaro, 2016). The term "Internet meme" was popularized in 1993 by Mike Godwin. Memes began to be associated with politics due to it being able to grab the attention of the younger audience. It has been seen that memes play an important role in making political content easier to understand (Amin & Hussain, 2023). Political memes can also increase political polarization (Penney, 2020). The survey of GCU students also shows a positive association with this.

In regard to political memes, perception refers to how people understand and interpret a political post and take action on it, and whether it affects their voting decision or not. Perception can be measured in 3 different ways: cognitive perception (understanding of the meme), affective perception (any emotional response to the meme), and behavioral intent (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2018). This research paper also focuses on this aspect of the behavior of Government College University, Lahore students.

### **Significance**

The timing of political memes can greatly impact the reputation and popularity of a political party (Iqbal, 2024). Political Memes have also been seen in promoting a specific candidate or political party (Al-Rawi, 2021). They are mostly one-sided support for a political party (Paz et al., 2021). Young voters, mostly aged 18-25, who are considered to be university students, can easily be influenced by the content that they see (Amin & Hussain, 2023). There is some evidence that suggests that the more young voters are exposed to political memes, the more politically active they become (Kasirye, 2019). Institutions like the Government College University Lahore, which is considered to be one of the most prestigious universities of Pakistan, with its diversity of student bodies, lecturers, and various departments, should be studied to understand the impact of political memes. This research paper focuses on how university students who are voters perceive changes in their perception when watching political memes.

### **Research Objectives**

The following are the research objectives of the current study:

1. To investigate if political memes affect the voting perception of students.
2. To find which platform students commonly used for political meme consumption.
3. To explore if political memes make it easier to understand politics.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Dawkins, in his book "The Selfish Gene" in 1976, used the term "Meme" and referred to it as "Unit of cultural transmission," meaning it focuses on how cultural ideas and trends spread, but now it has evolved from a simple word to having a whole different meaning. The advancement in technology has made simple drawings now turn into digital cartoons that explain complex situations in a simple and funny way. The Internet meme popularized by Godwin (1994) has turned into a global phenomenon. Memes are considered to be used as a mechanism that influences the masses to vote in favor of a particular party. Political memes are also now considered to be important components of public space, especially for young voters, who are not using any other archaic form of political communication (Tufekci, 2017). Political memes also create echo chambers by repeating the same side of the story and may cause division among people.

### **Evolution**

As technology becomes more and more advanced, the use of memes, especially on digital devices, has become a normal thing. It has been seen that memes become more relevant when they are used in a political context and transform into a means of expression in digital spaces (Leiser, 2022).

The use of political memes began in the early 2000's through George Bush, using the term "The Internets" in a debate. In the Pakistani context, the terms "Go Nawaz Go" and "Tabdeeli a nahi gai, tabdeeli a chuki hai" were used as political parties realized a quick and easy way of grabbing the public's attention. According to Iqbal (2024), the timing of memes can influence the reputation and popularity of a political party. It has also been seen that politicians affiliated with political parties also share memes showing how important political memes are (Romo, 2023). Political parties also realized that most of the people using social media are the younger generation, and targeting them would be a lot easier (Amin & Hussain, 2023). As political memes are satirical, it makes it difficult to understand what is true or not, so misinformation can spread rapidly (Frischlich et al., 2019). Memes are also a frequent vehicle for political criticism (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021).

### **Present Scenario**

In the present time, memes continue to play an important role in influencing the younger and older generations and are an important form of political participation (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Although they may explain complex issues simply, they may sometimes be inaccurate (Kulkarni, 2017). As Ben-Eliyahu et al. (2018) refer, it can cause cognitive, affective, and behavioral change. Political memes can also form like-minded communities (McKelvey et al., 2021). This study also focuses on how political memes affect the voting perception of students of Government College University, Lahore.

### **Research Gap**

Much research has been done internationally on how political memes affect the perception of the public, but in the context of Pakistan, less research has been done. Especially targeting the youth of Pakistan. This study aims to find out how political memes affect the voting perception of university students of Government College University, Lahore. This is important because GCU is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities of Pakistan, having a diversity of students coming from different social and economic backgrounds, and each student has their own understanding of political memes and voting perception. So, understanding how Ravians interpret memes and make up their voting decision is important.

**Research Questions**

RQ1. Do political memes impact the voting perception of students?

RQ2. Which platform do students commonly use for political meme consumption?

RQ3. To find out if political memes make it easier to understand politics?

**METHODOLOGY**

A Quantitative Methodology was used by creating a survey on Google Forms. A survey link was sent to the departmental groups of GCU, and links were also shared in person with students from various departments.

A sample of 100 students was taken, consisting of 63 females and 37 males, from various departments, with their age ranging from 18 to 25, because mostly this age range consists of university-going students and is also voters as well.

For the survey, a Likert scale was used, consisting of various options, and multiple-choice options were also provided for a better understanding of voting perception. Multiple choice options involved:

Frequency of watching political memes

The platform used for watching memes

How do they react to political memes?

Cronbach’s alpha and Descriptive statistics test were applied, including mean, median, and standard deviation. The results of descriptive statistics showed the central tendency and dispersion of students towards political memes and voter perception. Cronbach's alpha showed the internal consistency of the six-item Likert scale. The results showed  $\alpha = 0.65$ , which indicates acceptable reliability for this exploratory study (George & Mallery, 2003; Taber, 2018).

The respondents were informed that their data would only be used for research purposes, and their consent was taken. A choice of withdrawing was also provided.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The following is our data collection report, testing, and results:

**Demographic Information**

The following was the demographic information of respondents.

Table 1: Gender

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	37	37%
Female	63	63%

Table 1 shows that 63%(63) are female and 37%(37) are male respondents.

Table 2: Age

Age	Number	Percentage
18-21	59	59%
22-25	41	41%

Table 2 shows that 59%(59) are 18-21 whereas 41%(41) are 22-25 years old.

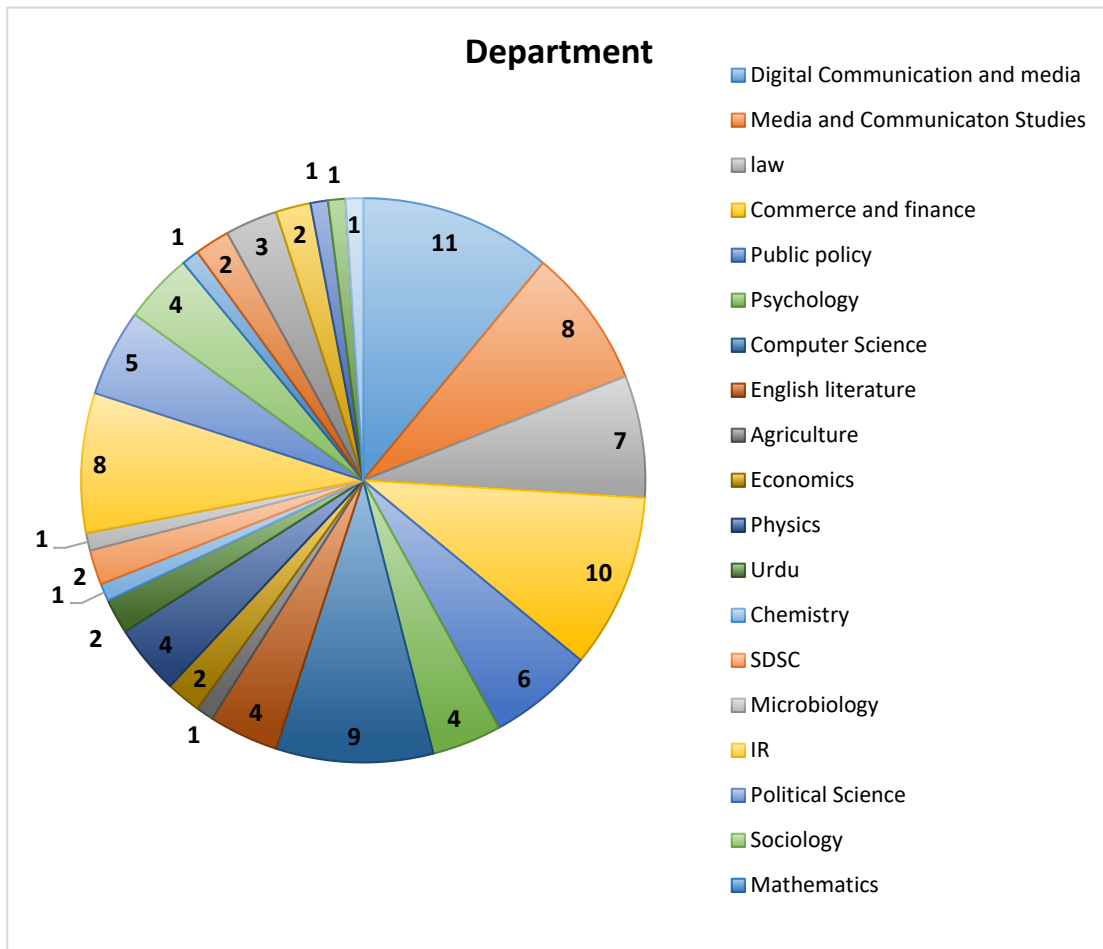


Figure 1: Department

Figure 1 shows that students 11%(11) are from Digital Communication and Media ,10%(10) are from Commerce and finance, 9%(9) are from Computer Science, 8 %(8) are from Media and Communication Studies, 8%(8) are from International Relations, 7%(7) are from Law, 6%(6) are from Public Policy,5%(5) are from Political Science, 4%(4) are from Psychology, 4%(4) are from English Literature, 4%(4) are from Physics, 4%(4) are from Sociology, 3%(3) are from Graphic Designing, 2%(2) are from Economics, 2%(2) are from Urdu, 2%(2) are from SDSC, 2%(2) are from Environmental Sciences, 2%(2) are from Software Engineering,1%(1) are from Microbiology,1%(1) are from Agriculture,1%(1) are from Chemistry, 1%(1) are from Translation Studies,1%(1) are from Punjabi,1%(1) are from Persian ,1%(1) are from Mathematics department.

**Survey Questions**

The following were the research questions.

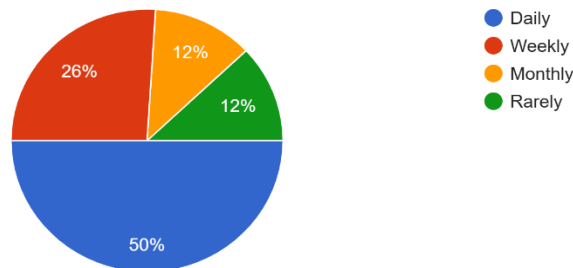


Figure 1: Encountering political Memes on Social Media

Figure 3 shows that 50 % (50) daily, 26%(26) weekly, 12%(12) monthly, and 12%(12) of respondents rarely encounter political memes on social media.

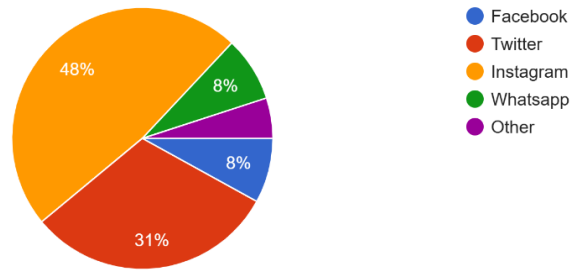


Figure 4: Platform used for Political Memes

Figure 4 shows that 48%(48) students often see political memes on Instagram, 31%(31) on Twitter, 8%(8) on Facebook, 8%(8) on WhatsApp and 5%(5) on other social media platforms.

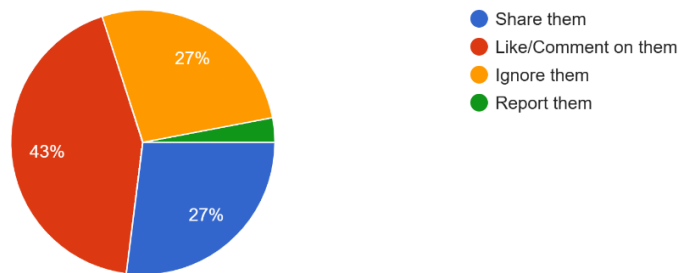


Figure 5: Reaction to Political Memes on Social Media

Figure 5 shows that 43 %(43) of students usually like and comment on political memes, 27%(27) often share them, 27% ignore them, and 3%(3) report the political memes on social media.

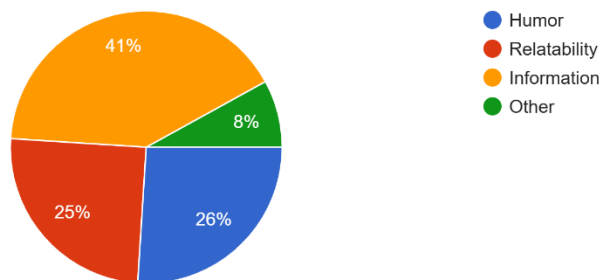


Figure 6: Effects of Political Memes

Figure 6 shows that 41%(41) are affected by informative political memes, 26%(26) are affected by humor, 25%(25) by relatable memes, and 8%(8) are affected by other types of political memes on social media.

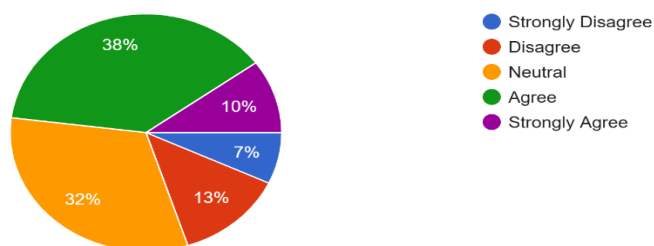


Figure 7: Effectively Convey Complex Political Issues

Figure 7 shows that 38%(38) of the respondents agree, 32%(32) are neutral, 13%(13) disagree, 10%(10) strongly agree, and 7%(7) strongly disagree that political memes on social media effectively convey complex political issues.

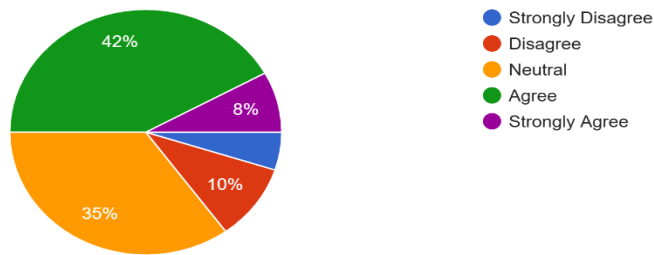


Figure 8: Influenced opinion by a Political Issue

Figure 8 shows that 42%(42) agree, 35%(35) are neutral, 10%(10) disagree, 8%(8) strongly agree, and 5%(5) strongly disagree that political memes ever influenced their opinion on a political issue or candidate on social media.

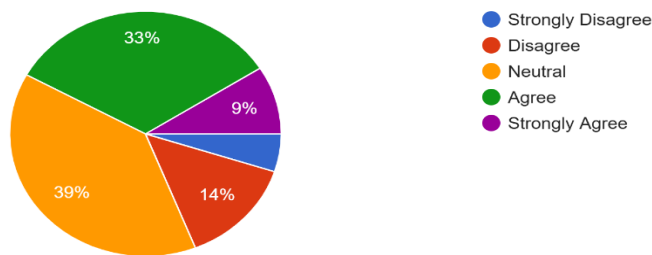


Figure 9: Political memes influence Voting Decisions

Figure 9 shows that 39%(39) are neutral, 33%(33) agree, 14%(14) disagree, 9%(9) strongly agree, and 5%(5) strongly disagree that political memes influence their voting decisions on social media.

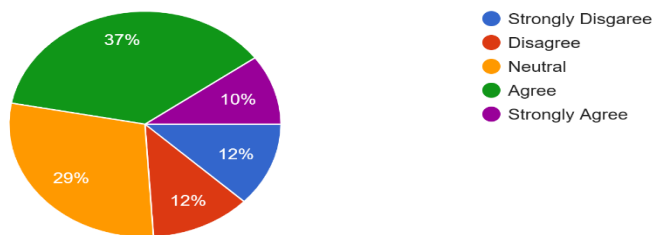


Figure 10: Political memes effectively convey political messages

Figure 10 shows that 37%(37) agree, 29%(29) are neutral, 12%(12) disagree, 12%(12) strongly disagree, and 10%(10) strongly agree that political memes effectively convey political messages on social media.

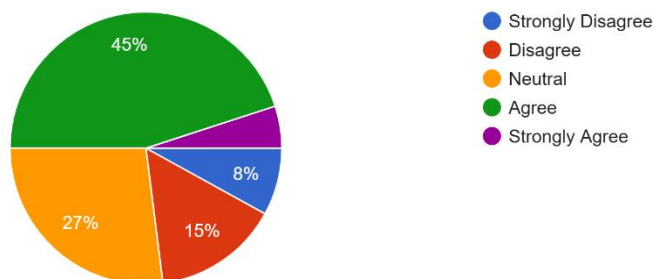


Figure 11: Political memes influence opinion on Current Events

Figure 11 shows that 45%(45) agree, 27%(27) are neutral, 15%(15) disagree, 8%(8) strongly disagree, and 5%(5) strongly agree that political memes influence their opinion on current events on social media.

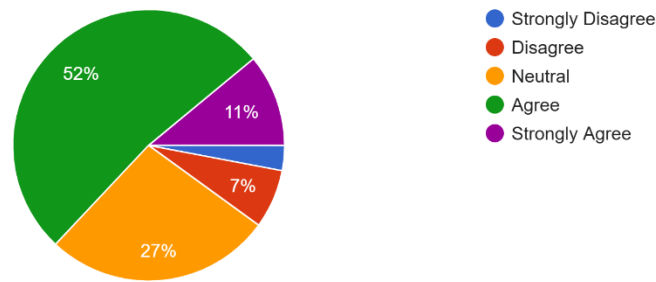


Figure 12: Political memes' impact on the overall political discourse

Figure 12 shows that 52%(52) agree, 27%(27) are neutral, 11%(11) strongly agree, 7%(7) disagree, and 3%(3) strongly disagree that political memes have an impact on the overall political discourse on social media.

**Data Analysis (Testing)**

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Political Memes

Perception Items (N=100)				
Items	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	
1: Political memes effectively convey complex political issues	3.36	3	1.0	
2: Political memes have influenced my opinion on a candidate	3.35	3	0.978	
3: Political memes influence my voting decisions	3.25	3	0.978	
4: Political memes effectively convey political messages	3.28	3	1.12	
5: Political memes influence my opinion on current events	3.3	4	1.02	
6: Political memes impact overall political discourse	3.616	4	0.888	

Scale 1=Strongly Disagree, Scale 2= Agree, Scale 3= neutral, Scale 4= Agree and Scale 5=Strongly Agree; N=100 students from GCU Lahore

Table 1 shows that the descriptive statistics (mean, median, and standard deviation) for all six Likert-scale items based on the responses of 100 students from Government College University Lahore. It summarizes the overall central tendency and dispersion of students' perceptions regarding the impact of political memes on voter perception.

Table 2: Gender Comparison

Items	Male Mean (n=37)	Female Mean (n=63)	P-Value	Significant?
1	3.647	3.36		No
2	3.35	3.25		No

Items	Male Mean (n=37)	Female Mean (n=63)	P-Value	Significant?
3	3.25	3.20	0.77	No
4	3.28	3.30		No
5	3.3	3.34		No
6	3.616	3.596		No

Table 2 shows that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students across all six Likert-scale items ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that gender does not play a role in shaping the impact of political memes on voter perception among GCU Lahore students.

### Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the six-item Likert scale. The results showed  $\alpha = 0.65$ , which indicates acceptable reliability for this exploratory study (George & Mallery, 2003; Taber, 2018). This suggests that the six questions moderately measure the same underlying construct of political meme influence on voter perception among GCU Lahore students.

### Discussion

The primary objective of this research paper was to see if political memes had an impact on the voters' perception of GCUL students. The mean is 3.25, which is slightly higher than neutral, and the value 0.978 suggests that the results were consistent, and most of the students agree that political memes impact their voting perception. The secondary target was to find which platform was commonly used by students for political meme consumption. Instagram, with a percentage of 37% votes, is considered the most commonly used platform by GCUL students. The third and last objective was to see if political memes make it easier for students to understand politics. With a mean of 3 and a standard deviation value of 1.0, it indicates that most of the students agree with political memes, making politics easier to understand.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to find out the impact of political memes on voters' perception by conducting a case study of Government College University, Lahore, targeting university students who use different social media platforms for political meme consumption. The research focused on knowing whether political memes had any effect on voters' perception, which social media platform was commonly used for political meme consumption, and whether watching political memes makes it easier to understand politics. According to the results, there was a positive association that political memes affect voting perception, Instagram was the most common platform used for meme consumption, and there was a positive association of memes making politics easier to understand. This research study helps in understanding the political memes consumption and voting perception of GCUL students.

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