



Semiotic analysis of political memes on Facebook pages

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ABSTRACT

Access to social media and the nature of content on social media platforms have been the driving forces of changing socio-psychological landscapes. Memes have become an integral part of social media and have become one of the biggest sources of popularity amongst the younger populations. Meme creators are now taking advantage of events around them from a wide variety of fields ranging from politics to sports to create memes. Humour and satire are two central elements of memes and are circulated across different platforms of social media attaining 'viral' status. Every political meme attempts to mock the political system trying to create a sense of ideology that favours specific political bodies (primarily political parties) and there is a rise in the number of political memes circulated during the election period. This paper attempts to study the world view constructed by the meme pages on Facebook by the memes and their respective captions. The study, in the light of the social construction of reality theory, tries to understand the nature of ideologies embedded within the images and the captions. Using semiotics, the study analyzed memes which were mostly visuals. The study will help to understand the relevance of memes within a political scenario as the internet users contribute to the direct and indirect spread of these ideologies.

Keywords: Memes, Social Construction of Reality, Facebook Meme pages, Political Memes.

Introduction

The subjective nature of people's perceptions of 'reality' has been a research area of interest for a long time now. Reality is studied through the lens of metaphysics in social sciences that aims at understanding reality from the perspective of 'existence'. The fluidity of the definitions of what is real and what is not particularly when it enters a larger landscape of social, cultural, psychological and economical makes it necessary to objectively define the fixed boundaries of the multiple perceptions of reality. Reality of the physical world is simpler and objective as opposed to the understanding of the reality of philosophical or ideological concepts whose reality is multi-nodal. This study aims at understanding the social process through which different versions of reality of political ideologies are constructed in the digital space of Facebook through images and text.

Social construction of reality

"Social construction of reality is a theory that assumes an ongoing correspondence of meaning because people share a common sense about its reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.37).

Reality is never a static idea, rather it is fluid and is based on a shared set of meanings that are constructed in a social context. Thus reality becomes an idea that is a part of a social landscape that takes form through communication of individuals' perceptions of meanings. Social media gives us a space where these meanings can be posted in the form of images and text that can be further extended by participants in the form of users of social media contributing in the form of comments.

Social construction of reality also assumes that the audiences are active and that they do not just store information but actively process it with cultural indicators reshaping the meanings to suit culturally defined needs. These indicators take on the form of symbols that define the environment and the elements contained within it. Media spaces become platforms for introduction of such meanings and social media become spaces for extension of these meanings. The meanings then undergo a process of 'sharing' the symbols thus turning individual meanings to a broader social symbol attached to different social elements.

Memes on facebook

Facebook has become one of the popular sources of accessing memes of all genres. The nature of the platform where users can upload content either on their personal profiles or on a group that functions like an online community is best suited to upload images in the form of memes that are loaded with ideological realities. The changing political landscape of India has witnessed a rise in the number of dedicated political meme pages that have evident ideological inclinations. It becomes crucial to understand how participants on these pages make meanings and how they are shared by the users in order to propagate specific opinions and ideologies that contribute to the political machinery of the country.

Studium and punctum

Roland Barthes (1980) in his book 'Camera Lucida' talks about two primary factors in a imagegraph that make any imagegraph stand out - studium and punctum. According to Barthes (1980) studium is the element that creates the interest towards the imagegraph, since the imagegrapher creates the image by focusing on the studium as the centre of attention. Barthes (1980) highlights the importance of the studium in a cultural context where the viewer of a imagegraph always looks at the imagery from a cultural perspective. He talks about the connotation process and its intricate relationship with the cultural landscape. He argues," it

is culturally that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions” (Barthes, 1980). Punctum becomes the supporting device in the form of the imagegraphic elements that stand out and ‘prick’ the viewer as an element that changes the meaning by adding more detail to the entire cultural landscape of the studium. This study draws on Barthesian concepts discussed above and is guided by the following research questions.

Research questions

- How are signs used to construct a political ideology in memes?
- Do the signs prompt responses that are directed towards social construction of reality?
- How do the imagegraphic elements in memes reflect ideologies that are political in nature?
- What are the dominant themes reflected in the comments posted by the users on the Facebook pages?

An overview of the existing literature revealed the existence of different areas of imagegraphic analysis that revolve around the analysis of memes from social and political perspectives. The theoretical framework of Roland Barthes’ ‘Camera Lucida’ has been instrumental in providing the tools for examination and analysis of different ranges of images, particularly from the point of view of the studium and punctum. The meme culture that has gained immense popularity since the social media revolution has provided academia with a wide range of lenses to explore the world view constructed through the meme culture. The careful examination of the available literature reveals that a research gap exists in terms of analyzing memes from the political perspective in the Indian context. This study attempts to identify the different inherent mechanisms of the memes to construct an alternative world view of politics that the mainstream media platforms of print and broadcast media don’t have the space for.

Memes and meme culture have gained popularity through the process of uploading images created with the help of image editing tools that are easily accessible, however the meme culture has been a topic of discussion in the academic world even before the rise of social media platforms but from a cultural point of view. The earliest literature points towards meme as a derivative of the word mimema which refers to imitation. Richard Dawkins (1976) talks of a meme culture where he talks about how the patterns of replication in human beings are genetically programmed to behave in a certain way and that most of the answers to the way we conduct ourselves with a goal oriented behavioural pattern can be understood from this perspective of cultural analysis of mimicking or imitating established behavioural patterns that are socially effective.

In his attempt to describe the meme, Dawkins (1976) talks about memes as units that carry cultural ideas, symbols or practices that are transmitted through discourses. The same argument made by Dawkins of imitation culture through meme creation and transmission becomes evident in the digital space where memes are created for cultural consumption loaded with cultural ideologies. Richard Brodie and Kate Distin extend the perspectives given to memes and look at meme culture from a cultural perspective. The authors view memes as cultural units that can be used to understand and assess human behavioural patterns. Bordie (1996) engages with the science of memetics as an invisible part of human society. He builds on Dawkins’ perspectives of memes and talks about how memes loaded with cultural ideas have entered our social systems through different platforms of mass media. Further, he said that memes are responsible for some of the pervasive issues plaguing our society. For the same reason, he

referred to memes as viruses and termed the society ‘infected’.

Kate Distin’s (2004) work is similar to Brodie’s (1996) on the lines of building on Dawkins’ views on memes. However, Distin’s work as the title suggests is a re-assessment of Dawkins’ views of memes as cultural replicators, which Distin compares to a gene and refers to memes as cultural DNA and goes on to shed light on the process of memetic evolution as a part of a drive towards human creativity and builds parallels between evolution of meme culture and human intelligence and consciousness.

The existing literature in the field of communication and media studies related to memes have now evolved to incorporate the digitally created images that are imitations from popular culture and mainstream media such as news channels, movies, paintings, TV shows, cartoon strips etc. Memes are analysed using tools of imagegraph analysis and visual analysis where areas like semiotics are extensively used to examine the underlying meanings of the images uploaded as memes on different social media platforms. To Bradley Wiggins (2019), memes are products of cultural communication and cultural transmission that gain popularity due to ‘satirical’ and humorous content that contain intertextual references catering to the ongoing political, economic, social and psychological landscapes. The author explores the rapidity with which memes and their inherent dimensions of meanings spread in the digital societies thus constructing alternate realities that are not produced by other mainstream media platforms. Research studies that use tools of semiotics to critically examine memes and the cultural landscapes created by memes are all dominantly focused on the mechanisms by which memes function to construct new realities

Heidi E. Huntington (2013) analysed memes from a constructionist approach to discover and assess how different theoretical approaches to studying memes from semiotic perspectives lead to new visual rhetoric being produced. She examines memes as discourses that provide alternate parallels to dominant media messages in the mainstream media platforms. This study presents new tools of studying memes from the ‘visual rhetoric’ approach. Sara Cannizaro (2016) examined memes from bio-semiotic and Peircean semiotic perspectives. There are many research articles dedicated to understanding memes from a semiotic perspective which sheds light on the importance of the meme culture in constructing a reality for the social consumption and creation of culture.

Research articles dedicated to memes and the impact they have on Indian societies are nearly negligent. Research works on memes in the Indian political context revolve around decoding the underlying political meanings and their implications on the Indian population. Anushka Kulkarni (2017) studied how humour works as a tool that fights oppression through meme culture in the Indian context. The study explored the impact of the memes on consumers using parameters such as political engagement, influence on political views and voting behaviour to assess their impact. The research used a survey method with questions attempting to study the above mentioned parameters among digital natives and digital immigrants. The study concluded that the impact of memes on the consumers is minimal yet crucial in the formation of political ideologies for the users.

Methodology

This study was conducted using the qualitative approach to dissect the imagegraphic elements and categorise them into the concepts of Roland Barthes - Studium and Punctum. Further, the study attempted to inspect the elements of the images chosen for analysis to unearth implicit meanings encoded in the memes. This study uses semiotic analysis supported by a textual

analysis of content produced in the form of comments to the corresponding samples of memes chosen. The semiotic analysis was carried out on the different elements presented within the images uploaded in the form of memes. These elements were studied individually through an interpretation of the signifier - signified relationship. This relationship was then justified by identifying the text in the comments section that supports the images. The semiotic analysis attempted to uncover the contribution of separate elements in constructing a set of ideological realities and the role of humour in this transference of ideological process.

The study was conducted to discover discourses on Facebook groups that are dedicated to uploading political memes with the intention of communicating an ideology that supports a particular political spectrum. Thus a purposive sampling method was used to identify the popular political pages and the latest content was filtered out and analysed. A total of thirteen posts were selected using a purposive sampling method that takes the ten latest posts as of April 2020. The comments sections were looked at for supporting evidence of content.

The analysis was conducted on the selected samples on two levels; the first level included the process of deconstruction of the different elements of the memes which were later analyzed for the signifier and signified from the perspective of studium and punctum as presented by Roland Barthes. The signified political message was interpreted based on the positioning of the studium and punctum within the images. The second level of analysis examined the comments to the images to identify how they extend meanings and references to studium and punctum elements placed within the images. The two levels of analysis presented us with an idea of how political meanings are socially constructed as the reality and how new associations are made and shared within the spaces of Facebook.

Analysis

The table below presents a breakdown of the studium and punctum as studied in a few select memes. The table is broken down further into signifiers and signified for the studium and punctum respectively thus recording the meanings of individual signs in a specific political climate in the Indian context.

	STUDIUM		PUNCTUM	
SI no	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
1.	Travelling	Boycotting the state for eating beef	Universal Studios Hollywood	Hypocrisy
2.	Cow	God in the wine shop because his ignorant children are killing the innocents	Wine shop	Hinduism in India
3.	Cow worship	Hinduism	Sea	Purity
4.	Gandhiji	Patriotism	Wall	Stand-up comedy

5.	A man holding the constitution of India	Chandrashekhar is back	Muslim crowd	unity
6.	Krishna and Arjuna (Hindu Gods)	Arjuna with a bow and arrow	Chariot, soldiers	Battle
7.	Metaphorical Engineer	Satire on the employment situation	Old Personal Computer	Outdated technology of the nation
8.	Narendra Modi and the other politicians	Narendra Modi as a powerful person demanding respect	Animals	Comparison of different politicians to different animals
9.	Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi	Contrasting appearances of the politicians	Indian flag and the portrayal of the ministers	Health comparison between both the politicians
10.	Journalist and the dog	Trying to build a comparative contrast between journalist and the dog	Journalist in her environment	A dog is more loyal than a journalist
11.	CM making the announcement, traffic jam, actor's reaction	Carelessness of the public	Crowd and chaos	Ignorant and irresponsible public
12.	Slaughtered goats	Religious comparisons	Blood filled floor	the gory image of animal slaughter

TABLE 1.1: Table showing the semiotic analysis of the studium and punctum of the images.



Fig 1. An image of two prominent Indian politicians sitting outside Universal Studios, LA.

This image (Fig. 1) is an old satirical photograph that tries to show the irony of the anti-beef consumption statements being made by a political party. The studium is the travelling of the famous personalities of the party to Los Angeles, which is in California and happens to be a beef consuming state. The photograph mocks the “boycott Kerala” campaign that was run by a political party in the light of the beef consuming campaign of the state. The signifier for the studium is travelling to California and clicking a photograph there and the signified is a

sarcastic humour of urging to boycott Kerala and avoid going there. The punctum, supporting the studium, is the background that shows the entrance to the universal studios in Hollywood, California. The signifier is the entrance to universal studios and the signified is the hypocrisy of the political party that urges a ban on visiting Kerala because the state promoted eating beef while the same personalities visit a beef consuming state outside of India.



Fig 2. An image showing a cow standing outside a wine store.

In this image (Fig. 2), a cow is seen standing and staring at a wine shop that sells alcohol. The studium here is the cow that is seen staring at the alcohol shop in a funny context. The cow's actions become the signifier and the cow plays the role of a symbol of divinity since it is considered holy in the Hindu culture. The caption illustrates how God is confused to see his innocent children lynching fellow human beings in the name of cow. The punctum becomes the wine shop that the cow is looking at which adds meaning to the studium making the entire image humorous and bizarre.

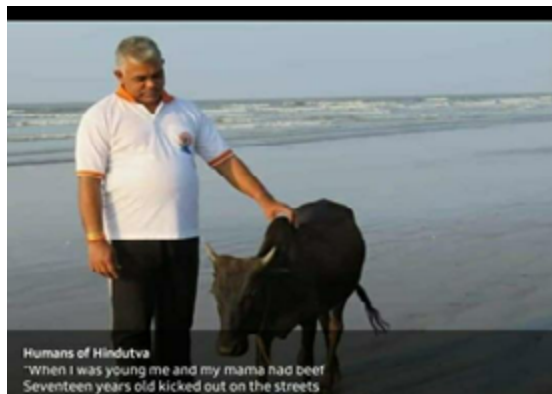


Fig 3. An image of a politician touching a cow

This image (Fig. 3) shows a famous personality touching a cow and looking at it with admiration. The studium becomes the cow and the person touches the cow from a divine perspective. The signifier is the bond shared between the cow and the man and the revered look of admiration shown towards the cow. The punctum is the practices followed by a majority of the Hindu community in worshipping the cow in India. The punctum is the sea in the background.

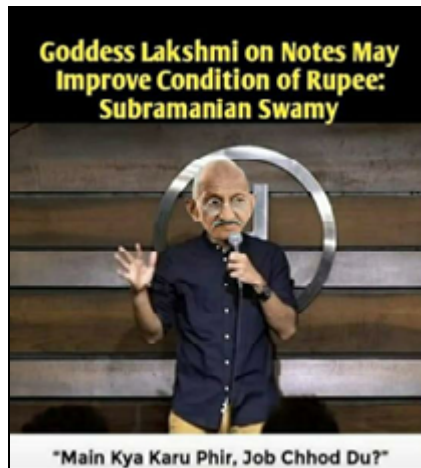


Fig 4. A morphed image of a stand-up comedian with the face of Gandhiji

This image (Fig. 4) is a morphed image of Gandhi's face over that of a stand-up comedian performing his act. The supporting text is that of Gandhi being disappointed because a famous politician suggested replacing Gandhi's image on the currency notes with that of goddess Lakshmi who is seen as the goddess of wealth. The studium is the image of Gandhi performing a stand-up comedy where the signifier is Gandhi and the signified becomes the irony of the statement made by the politician to replace the image of Gandhi. The punctum is the stand-up comedy venue wherein the signifier becomes the changing context of Gandhi performing a stand-up comedy and the signified is the disappointment over the idea of replacing the image of a renowned world leader from the currency notes with that of a goddess.



Fig 5. An image of a prominent leader participating in a protest holding a copy of the Constitution of India

This image (Fig. 5) is that of a prominent dalit leader holding a copy of the Constitution of India and leading the protest against Citizenship Amendment Act along with the Muslim community. The studium here is the image of the leader raising his arms holding out the Constitution of India and the signifier is the combination of a dalit leader (of a Hindu minority community) holding out the Constitution book while the signified is the use of the book as a symbol of opposition to the ruling party's actions that have affected a dominant part of the society. The punctum here is the large number of people wearing the sacred worship 'topi' (cap) surrounding the leader. The signifier is the process of people gathering and supporting in large numbers and the signified is the unity among minorities in India.



Fig 6. An image from a popular scene from Mahabharata

This image (Fig. 6) refers to a famous illustration from Mahabharata (a grand Hindu mythological epic) and the caption adds a new meaning to the image by recreating the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna in a modern context of a war propaganda that involves advanced technologies. The studium here is the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna whereas the signifier is the grandeur of the kurukshetra war and the importance of the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. This is subsequently extrapolated to the Bhagavad Gita (a holy scripture for the Hindus). The signified is the two important characters in the mythology being re-interpreted in a modern context. The punctum is the war imagery where the signifier is the dark images of soldiers engaged in a war and the signified is the dark times that we have been led into.



Fig 7. An image from a Bollywood movie of the actor looking confused and staring at the computer screen

This image (Fig. 7) is that of a confused user of a Microsoft computer. The studium here is of the man staring at the computer in utter shock and disappointment. The signifier here is the man's expression of staring at the computer and the signified is the shock expressed by many Indians over the statements made on the Citizenship Amendment Act by a top level Microsoft - India representative. The punctum here is the old computer that the man is staring at. The signifier is the computer, a symbol of Microsoft, which dominates the Indian computer business and the signified here is the need to boycott the products of Microsoft consequent to the statements made by the company's representative.



Fig 8. An image containing a combination of four different photographs of the prime minister in different situations

This image (Fig. 8) is a combination of four photos of the prime minister along with other politicians shown as his 'pets'. Studium here is Narendra Modi who is with other politicians in all the four photographs. While the first photo shows the Indian prime minister with a peacock, in the remaining three photos politicians are compared to a Penguin, Monkey and Donkey. Here the punctum is Modi being adored by all the other politicians but in different contexts. The humour element comes from the comparison drawn with the above animals. Signified in the first photo is that of Narendra Modi feeding his peacock with love. The second and third photo signify fake love shown to Narendra Modi by politicians by giving him the bouquet. The fourth photo signifies the fake hug given by Rahul Gandhi.



Fig 9. An image comparing Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi

This image (Fig. 9) is a combination of two photos portraying Rahul Gandhi as aged and weak and another showing a fit and healthy Narendra Modi, who is also described as a Young ultra max pro. In the first photo Rahul Gandhi becomes the studium while in the second Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi becomes the studium. The punctum here is the Indian flag behind Narendra Modi. The signifier is showing Rahul as a weak person and Modi as the fit and perfect personality for everyone in this age. The signified presents Rahul Gandhi as a misfit for the role of a politician.



Fig 10. An image of a popular journalist with a dog next to her.

This image (Fig. 10) is that of a journalist sitting and listening to something on her earphones while a dog stands next to her. The copy is trying to portray how a dog is way more loyal than that of a journalist. The studium is constituted by two subjects (the journalist and the dog) captured in the same frame. The punctum is the comparative framework established between the two subjects and inferring that a dog is more loyal than the journalist. The signified is how an animal can be more loyal than any human being and the signifiers are the journalist and the dog.



Fig 11. An image showing the traffic conditions in Delhi after lifting lockdown restrictions.

In this image (Fig. 11), the chief minister of Delhi Kejriwal says that people should learn to live with Corona. The second part of the image reveals the worst traffic snarl ups in Delhi the next day after the chief minister's statement. A reaction to this is illustrated in the third photograph wherein a popular bollywood actor is amused by the turn of events. The studium here is the Delhi traffic and how bad it looks even during the pandemic. The punctum is Kejriwal making the statements. The signified refers to how the mob mentality works even in the times of a pandemic. The signifier is the bollywood actor's reaction to the clogged traffic situation in Delhi.



Fig 12. An image of goat sacrifice during Eid

In this image (Fig. 12) shows goats sacrificed on the day of Eid. The copy talks about how Hindus give milk to God and they are criticized for it and Muslims keep spilling blood every year and they are not stopped. Here the studium is the dead goats lying everywhere and the punctum is the floor filled with blood. And the punctum uses a cultural act to criticize a particular religious practice and draw comparisons between the two religions. The signified is how Muslims kill a lot of cows and goats every year while Hindus are being accused of wasting milk and food for their God. The signifier is the festival Eid.

Analysis of the comments

The second level of analysis examined the comments section using Barthes' concepts of studium and punctum to find out how social reality is manifested.

Fig 1.

“Dunghis (dramatic individual)”, “Pablo Escobar”, “camera crazy”, “hats off mallus”, “idiot”

Fig 2.

“Cow piss is gold”, “moonlight indeed” “thoda merlot”

Fig 3.

“Yo yo dahi Singh” “bhakts vs cow eaters”, “Gau rakshak (cow protector)” “testicular cancer”

Fig 4.

“Failure of economy”, “erasing Gandhiji from the minds of future generations”, “next is Modi's image on currency”

Fig 5.

“Best news of the day”, “scared government”, “conditional freedom”, “iconic image of the decade”

Fig 6.

“Nut clear power”, “meditate to select your bow bomb”, “spice Jet seat”

Fig 7.

“Bhakts lack computer skills”, “breaking windows”, “fuck Microsoft”, “jai sree ubuntu”

Fig 8.

“Animal lover”, “sad to see favorite actor getting old”, “one lion, the true king”.

Fig 9.

“Young RaGa”, “modiji young forever”, “weed v/s yoga”, “HIV positive “.

Fig 10.

“Chinese informer”, “please don’t insult dogs”, “encounter her”, “dogs have more dignity and loyalty”.

Fig 11.

“Bhikari CM”, “bhadwa Kejriwal “, “master stroke by Modiji”.

Fig 12.

“Bakra lives matter”, “matt khao non veg”, “saale suar”, “desh se nikaalo “.

Discussion and conclusion

A careful analysis of the samples used for the study reveal the different ways in which the memes construct ideologies and alternate realities for users. Political memes are created entirely on the basis of current political scenarios in the country. The memes use images and images taken from different political spaces of mass media such as social media handles, magazines, television, newspapers etc. and reconstruct them using text and image editing software. The memes with their combination of pictorial and textual stimuli become carriers of strong opinions of political ideologies which take on the form of signs that diffuse into societies through digital spaces. The research question 1 examines how signs are used to construct political ideologies through memes. All the memes studied have been effective in communicating political ideologies that take multiple forms particularly leaning in the direction of the opinions of the communicators.

The dominant conflict of ideologies between the left wing and right wing politics are reflected in the images and the text accompanying them. The political ideologies of the admins is the motivational factor to get them to upload content mocking and creating satirical content against the dominant ideologies of a particular group. There are symbols that go beyond the political ideologies to incorporate religious symbols like cow, bhagvad geeta, Eid etc. There are signs that use popular politicians who represent different political parties and their respective ideologies. Some of the memes studied compare different politicians on their physical appearances and attire. There are certain memes that revolve around using disconnected images from the context of politics but get a political meaning with the text in the form of captions and superimposed text thus communicating the political ideology through the disconnected/random imagegraph. The signs used in the creation of the memes, which in turn become carriers of political ideologies, thus become signs with a potential to influence the political landscapes of the society.

The second research question studies the role of the content posted in the comments sections which present to us the perspectives of the users and how they interpret the memes uploaded and if the comments carry forward the political ideologies embedded in the memes. Interestingly all the comments studied as a part of the sampling framework contribute directly to world views constructed about politics. All the comments studied add a textual affirmation to the political ideologies in the memes and strengthen the political messages. The comments also help in grounding the meanings interpreted and giving a context of interaction with the images and their multiple contexts of meanings.

The third research question explores the dynamics of the images and the corresponding text in the process of ideology construction. All the images studied are posted in the dedicated meme pages that are run by admins who intend to construct a set of specific political ideologies as identified by the researcher. The images are chosen carefully and presented creatively to cater to a specific ideology within the existing political climate or they present a critique on the dominant political ideology of a particular individual or a political party. The political meanings of the images are extended by placing the imagegraphic elements in a specific context using text to support their arguments. The image editing tools have been used quite creatively to combine different contexts of ideas to incorporate the political ideology for instance the imagegraph of Gandhi's face being merged with that of a stand-up comedian. The conscious choice of elements brought into the same space of the imagegraph, further supported by the textual content, goes on to add a more specific meaning to the entire set of elements.

The fourth research question identifies dominant themes reflected in the images and the text that become elements of political ideology construction. A majority of the memes are constructed around a comparative framework of references and elements that support a particular political party. Religious values and religious symbols are used and ridiculed from a political perspective to construct a certain perception of the meme. For instance, usage of mythological references from the Bhagavad Geeta, which is the holy scripture of the Hindu religion, or usage of an imagegraph showing blood from the slaughtered lambs for meat after the festival of Eid are images depicting religion from a political perspective in a space meant for humour and satire. Specific signs in memes are used to create a political discourse that signifies political meanings. Most of the images are presented in the context of political events and landscapes.

The signs are supported by captions and comments to expand the boundaries of meanings generated by the memes. The second level of analysis reveals the presence of the effects of a socially constructed reality that is reflected in the comments section as well. Even the comments are mostly humorous and use the same tools of 'meaning sharing'. The imagegraphic elements of studium and punctum use elements like satire, humour, sarcasm, reality check and metaphoric comparison to construct the meanings. A majority of the comments are in a dominant ideological position with that of the posted imagegraph; however most of the comments revolve around themes like hypocrisy, commentary on religious politics and satirical humour.

Notes on the Contributor

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