Internet meme and Political Discourse: *A study on the impact of internet meme as a tool in communicating political satire*

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ABSTRACT

Humor has been used as a tool against oppression since ages. With the advent of digital technologies, internet memes have gained prominence. Memes are mediums that communicate information through humor and satire. Today, internet memes have become a part of the political campaigning. This research paper thus analysis how internet memes have been used to communicate political satire. The study deals with the impact of internet memes on digital natives and digital migrants in India. Parameters like political engagement, influence on political views and voting behaviour are used to analyse the impact of memes. Using questionnaire as a tool for data collection, the research concludes that internet memes are used as a tool of political discourse but does not have a major impact on audience although it improves political engagement of the digital natives.Elaboration likelihood model and Agenda setting theory is used as a theoretical base for the study.

Keywords: Political Discourse, Internet Meme, Elaboration likelihood model, Agenda setting, Political Satire.

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 internet consumption records mention that there are 462,124,989 internet users in India which constitute 34.8% of the population of India. The Cisco forecast which gave the Visual Networking Index, forecasted a change in digital consumption in India from 373 million (2016) to 829 million (2021). Web 2.0 has given a way to participatory communication model where media consumers are not merely passive recipients of content but they are active participant as they understand and assess the content. One of the newer mediums of participatory communication is 'Internet Meme'.

Richard Dawkins, a pioneer in the study of memetics, introduced the concept of 'memes' in his book 'The Selfish Gene (1976). The term meme comes from the Greek word 'mimeme which means 'to imitate'(Dawkins, 1989). This concept then became a part of the popular culture. With the advent of internet and digital technologies, the term 'Internet Meme' gained popularity.

Patrick Davisondefines internet meme as:

"A piece of culture, typically a joke which gains influence through online transmission".(Buchel, 2012)(Dawkins, 1989)

Internet meme is considered as a medium of promotion which can reach wider audience in a short span of time. The history of meme dates back to the time when emoticons were developed. The sideways smiley face which was created using punctuation marks by Scott E. Fahlman in 1982 was the first emoticon that was used in online communication. Fahlman mentioned that emoticons were required in online mode of communication as they help in understanding humor or sarcasm used in the language.

Memes have played an important role in political discourse. One of the recent most prominent meme was the #ZodiacTed that was viral during the elections in USA in 2016. These memes portrayed Ted Cruz as a zodiac killer. A research survey by 'Public Policy Polling' concluded that due to these memes about 40% of the voters in Florida thought that he was actually a zodiac killer and their voting decisions were influenced by these memes.The internet memes also led to political engagement of people. Memes have played a major role in Indian politics too. It has been used as a medium to communicate views about issues, people and political parties. Memes were prominently used during the issue of demonetization, GST etc. It is also used widely by the opposition parties to comment on decisions of the government. (Buchel, 2012)

This research paper thus deals with the study to:

1. Understand how internet meme is used through social networking mediums to communicate political issues.

2. Analyse the practice of internet meme and scrutinise its role in creating a paradigm shift in political discourse

3. Study the impact of internet meme in communicating political satire.

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LITERATURE REVIEW
Humor and Satire as a tool for discourse
The main components of a meme are humor and satire. Since the advent of media, humor was used as an instrument to comment and criticize against oppression. The history of humor being used as a tool dates back to the stories and pictures in the anti-Nazi comics. Since then, till the recent movements like the Serbian Otpor movement or the protests in China, Zimbabwe, Syria, Egypt etc, humor has been used as a tool for criticizing the oppression with humor. (Hajizada, 2010)

There have been records where humor as well as satire has been used as a form of political commentary. It has been termed as a subculture and used widely in different political campaigns. A research by George (2012) mentions that this medium has been used for political engagements too.(Sreekumar, 2013)

Political Humor
Political humor has been an important part of political discourse in a society. It attracts not only the people who are active in politics but also helps in forming opinions for people who are not active participants in political issues and discussions. Various researchers' mention that exposure to political humor increases political attention and helps in learning about political issues especially in the digital natives. This also leads to an increase in the feeling of political efficacy and interest. Also political humor is a mix of humor and user generated content. It thus includes the opinion of the masses and hence has a deeper impact on the audience. (Hajizada, 2010)

The concept of Internet memes has become popular these days. There have been many websites like knowyourmeme.com, memedump.com, or memebase.com who act as an archival for the memes. Many professions like public relations and advertising have started using memes creatively to communicate their message and attract audiences. The information that is passed through these memes is for creating a buzz and is for publicity purpose rather than for just giving information. Memes that are used in political campaigning are used for creating public opinion and as a tool for propaganda.(Bauckhage, 2011)

Meme and Popular Culture:
Dawkins mentions that memes are a small part of our culture.(Chick, 1999) This spreads from one person to another by imitation or copying. These memes are thus an important component while media from a political science perspective. Memes have become new form of civic participation too. (Shiftman, 2013)(Nowak, 2013)

There has been a direct relationship between politics and popular culture. This relationship has been explored through various studies. A study by Bayrm (2008) explains how entertainment has been used as a medium to involve audiences in political issues and for helping them to understand politics. Jones (2010) in his study explains how satirical television as a form of popular culture can result in informed, critically sound and active citizens who have high political engagement.(Plevriti, 2013)(Segev, 2015)(Reime, 2012)

Role of Internet meme
Internet meme has been an important part of the social life as it helps in opinion formation. Amongst the various roles, a major one is that it helps in conveying information. Most of the times for digital natives it acts like a primary source of information too as they turn to read more of the news on the basis of the memes made on it. (Liisi Lainesk, 2016)

Memes are used as a medium for persuading citizens to vote for a particular political party. Shiftman in his book- 'Memes in Digital Culture', explains how this medium was efficiently used during the 2008 US elections. His research mentions that these memes are more of user generated content than information generated by political elites. Even though they are user generated these memes look professional. They include videos and photos produced by professional artists. A lot of research goes into making of these content as a part of political campaigning. Shiftman mentions that these memes are a mode through which civic participation is encouraged as the citizens can express their political opinions and be a part of debates and discussions which cannot be done through traditional mediums. (Shiftman, 2013)

Using memes used in Politics:
Political campaigners use memes as a medium for communicating with the netizens. Paid bloggers, micro bloggers and commenters are hired to generate content. They thus create images and opinions in the mind of people. A recent report mentions that in Azerbaijan, the production and circulation of internet memes were included as a part of their social media strategy. Memes are used for propaganda to reinforce ideologies, identities and stereotypes. Even during the World War One, these memes were used in the form of satirical texts, images and artistic expressions. Poets and artists were hired even during those days to create cartoons and messages which could be publicised through posters and newspapers. (Leong, 2015)

Internet and Political Engagement:

A Pew Research study mentions that there has been an increase in the number of individuals who use internet, social media websites as well as the number of individuals who use social media websites for their political activities. (Nowak, 2016). The main target of these netizens using new media for political discourse is the digital natives.(Heiskanen, 2017)The people who follow these social media websites are engaged in commenting and sharing this information further to other audiences. They produce and distribute content too. These users are politically very active by liking and commenting on various issues which thus encourages political engagement.(Brunello, 2012)(Chandler, 2008)

Theoretical Framework

Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of management explains how persuasion is used as a tool to affect opinions. There are two ways of persuasion. One that focuses persuasion through cognitive way that elaborates what is presented and the second route where an argument is formed to persuade a person and his/her opinion is manipulated. This is the peripheral route of persuasion. Memes are a tool of political discourse that uses the cognitive and the peripheral route to communicate and to influence public opinions. This tool of discourse uses humor and satire as elements for persuasion. (McClure, 2016)

Agenda settingtheory is also applied to this research. The memes are used by the media companies to form opinions. Through these memes the media companies do propaganda and publicize their ideologies as they do not just give information to the people but analyses it critically and gives a view on it. In theoretical words, these media companies through the use of memes do not just tell people what to think but they tell them what to think about. A sub theory of Framing is applicable here where the reality is altered and the pictures in our heads are nothing but the opinion that the media companies try to communicate.

RESEARCH DESIGN
Scope of the study

This research studies the use of internet meme as a tool of discourse that communicates political satire. This work examines the internet meme which are publicized through social networking mediums in India. The research studies the impact of political meme on digital natives in India and its influence on political engagements. Based on the content analysis of the usage of internet memes for two political issues in India, the researcher portrays the significance of internet meme in political discourse whereas the survey if digital natives will assist in understanding the effect of these internet memes from a behavioral economic perspective.

Hypothesis

H0: Internet meme is used as a tool for communicating political satire but does not have an impact on the audience.

H1: Internet meme has brought a paradigm shift in the political discourse and it influences the political engagement of digital natives in India.

Research Methodology

Qualitative and Quantitative methodology is used for the study. Structured questionnaire is used as a tool for conducting survey. A survey of Media consumers to understand the impact of these political satires on people and its influence on political engagement is conducted. These media consumers (50 no's) include digital migrants (25 no's) and digital natives (25 no's). The samples are selected on the basis of simple random sampling.

Variables

The internet memes are independent variables in the study where as political discourse, political engagement and the paradigm shift in the discourse are the dependent variables. Internet memes influence these dependent variables they affect the media consumers.

Data Analysis

Closed ended questions are analysed using SPSS where are thematic analysis is used for studying the open ended questions.
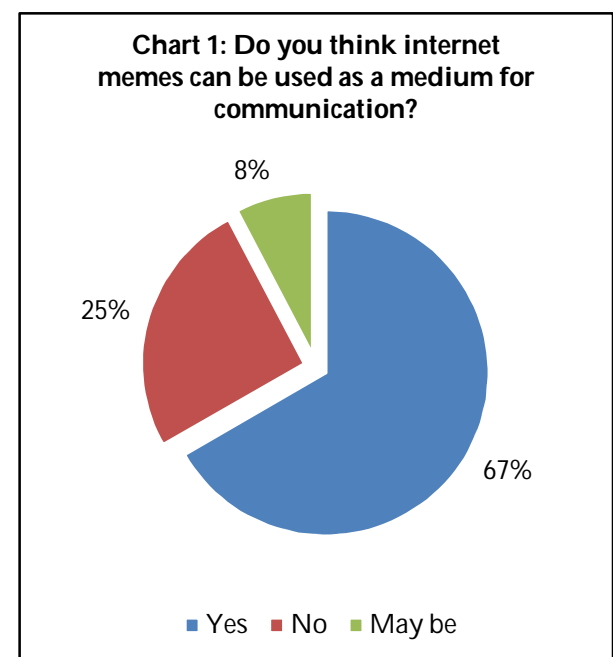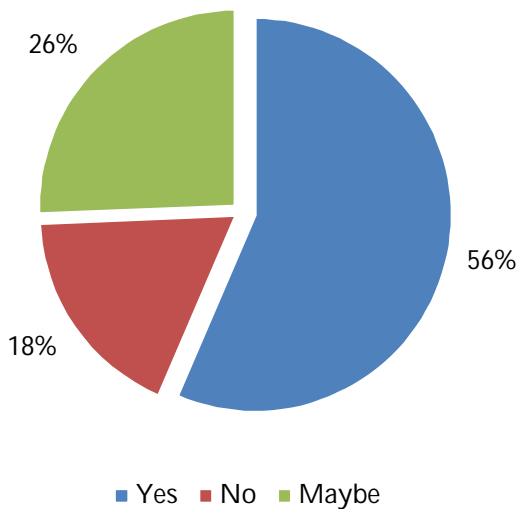
FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Chart 1: Do you think internet memes can be used as a medium for communication?

8%

25%

67%

■ Yes ■ No ■ May be

Chart 2: Can internet memes be used as a tool for political discourse?

26%

56%

18%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Maybe

Amongst the people who were surveyed most of them express an opinion that internet meme can be used as a medium for communication as well as a tool for political discourse The mediums that influence their political decisions include the traditional mediums especially newspapers and television, political speeches, editorials, debate shows etc. The factors that influence individuals to vote for a particular political party include: The party's agenda, their manifesto, the leaders of the party, their functioning, campaigns, the image of the party in the public mind and the work that the party has done earlier. Apart from that, how media portrays a particular political party also influences the public decision.

Chart 3: Do Internent memes influence your political decisions?

15%

21%

64%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Sometimes
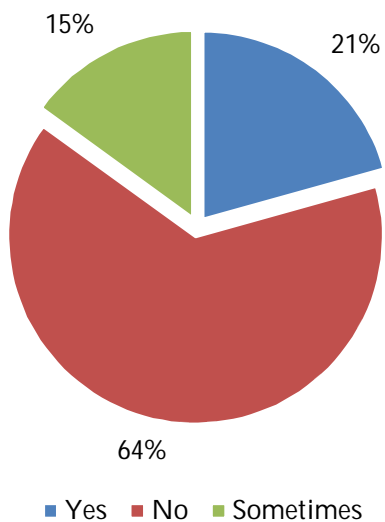
Even though internet memes are accepted as a medium for communication it does not influence the political decisions of the majority and also majorly does not influence people to support of oppose a particular political party. Memes are produced and distributedby political parties as a part of their campaigning. There are used as a tool for propaganda too. Campaigning through social media and using memes have increased the engagement of people. The digital natives not are involved more in political issues as they can easily express their opinions through new media but it is not the new media or the memes that influence their decisions.

Chart 4: Do internet memes influence you to support/oppose a political party

8%   7%

85%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Sometimes

CONCLUSION

Internet memes have been used as a tool in political discourse. But there is not paradigm shift in the tools used due to the coming of new media. Traditional mediums are still preferred as a medium for communication with the digital migrants. Traditional as well as new mediums are used for communicating with the digital natives. Memes are produced and distributed. These memes are accepted by people for communicating their ideas but it does not have an impact on the voting behavior or political views.

Usage of internet memes through social networking mediums to communicate political issues.

Political parties use memes to oppose or criticize certain issues. These memes are used through social networking platforms to communicate the ideas to a larger audience. Internet memes are mostly user generated but there are also the ones that are developed by political parties as a tool for propaganda.

Internet meme and paradigm shift in political discourse

Memes are considered as humor, to comment on a person, idea, ideology in a sarcastic manner. They are still not given importance as the content generated by traditional media as the audiences know it is used to comment negatively. Thus, though there has been a shift in the mediums used for political discourse, internet meme is just a part of it. It does not cause a paradigm shift.

Impact of internet meme in communicating political satire.

Internet meme does help in communicating political satire but it does not have an impact on the change in voting behavior, political opinions and ideologies of people. Memes are considered just as a source of entertainment. Also, internet meme by media organizations helps in framing issues in the mind of audiences.

Thus the null hypothesis –'Internet meme is used as a tool for communicating political satire but does not have an impact on the audience' proves correct.

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