

# POLITICAL MEMES AND PERCEPTIONS: A STUDY OF MEMES AS A POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TOOL IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** The word ‘meme’ was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book ‘The Selfish Gene,’ as an attempt to explain the way cultural information spreads. A meme acts as a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols or practices that can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena within a mimetic theme. Memes started on the Internet in 1996 with the first-ever viral sensation of a baby dancing on ‘cha-cha-cha’ (3D dancing baby). With its growing popularity, it has become a means of influencing the mindset of people who view, follow and share these memes. Memes have a potential to focus on real-world issues which when consumed by a user influences them to share it further thus leading to its large consumption. Memes can be denoted as; ‘Amplification by Simplification’ which basically means they have a potential to condense a complex political fact into a powerful, brief and an effective way which engages a large audience. Hence, it is becoming a powerful tool for communication. In the following paper, we attempt to understand how Internet memes are used to communicate political issues in India. For this, the method of content analysis will be used to observe the practice of memes and its role will be scrutinised to reflect whether it is creating a new paradigm shift in the political discourse. The amount of viewership and type of comments posted will also be a way to gauge the response of the audience. Also, by understanding the relationship between political memes and the Indian audience, we will be able to study whether these memes help in changing the perception of the audience if at all. Moreover, if they do, what are the factors which help the meme becomes an easy tool to affect the audience’s political perceptions.

**Keywords:** Internet Meme, Perception of Audience, Political Communication, India

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## Introduction

Mememes are a unit of communication, which disseminates cultural ideas, symbols, or practices that can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, gestures, and rituals. With the advancement of technology, Internet memes became a popular tool for communication. The first ever Internet meme started in 1996, with the first ever-viral sensation of a baby dancing on ‘cha-cha-cha’ (3D dancing baby).

The earlier memes portrayed in newspapers were cartoon caricatures which circulated in print media and not digitally, whereas memes circulated on the internet are called internet political memes as they are the ‘culture idea’ propagated in the digital age.

Mememes can be denoted as; ‘Amplification by Simplification’ ( McCloud, 1994) which means that they have a potential to condense a complex political fact into a powerful and effective way which engages a large audience. They also focus on real-world issues, and thus the political meme is a popular medium amongst the internet audience. Buchel in 2012 mentioned meme as a piece of culture typically a joke which gains influence through an online transmission. Early studies also show that political memes can increase civic participation and citizens can express their political opinions and be part of debates and discussions, which cannot be done through traditional mediums (Shiffman, 2013).

The role of the internet meme has been talked about a way of forming opinions for people native to the digital realm, and it acts as a primary source of information too as they turn to read more of the news from the memes made on it (Liisi Lainesk, 2016).

In this paper, Indian political communication is related to the governance, political ideology and state mechanisms of particular political parties and representatives. Thus, political memes as a tool to analyse political communication is the aim of this paper.

### ***Objective***

Our main objectives are to understand the way the internet meme is used to communicate Indian political issues, scrutinise the role of memes in the Indian political context and to analyse whether political memes can mould the political perspective of the audience. Furthermore to show why memes are a tool to communicate political issues in India.

### ***Hypothesis***

Political memes act as a tool of political communication and help in influencing the perception of the audience in context to the political discourse in India.

### ***Research Questions***

1. How are internet memes used to communicate political issues in India?
2. Does the practice of memes create a new paradigm shift in political discourse?
3. Do political memes help in changing the perception of the audience pertaining to political issues?
4. Which factor help the meme becomes a tool to affect the audience's political perception?

### ***Literature Review***

Earlier studies on political memes have discussed the construction of meaning through it. A study, 'Discovering the Discourse of Internet Political Memes', (Brian E. McClure, University of Georgia) defined the Internet Political Meme (IPM), posts to resemble individual panels of comic books or political cartoons, in reference to McCloud (1994) who refers to this as "amplification by simplification", a process through which ideas are made accessible to a wider audience, by "focusing on specific details" and by "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'" (p. 30). This study also analysed that how this would appear to be beneficial for democratic participation, with the potential for more people to be better-informed participants. It took Postman's assertions to be true which contended (1985), "You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content. [. . .] You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content" (p. 7) and considers the possibility that the form of the IPM, works against the content, and subsequently the goal of increased well-informed participation.

The research titled, 'Internet meme and Political Discourse: A study on the impact of the internet meme as a tool in communicating political satire' (Dr Anushka Kulkarni, Amity University, Madhya Pradesh) concluded that internet memes are used as a tool of political discourse but do not have a major impact on audience although it improves political engagement of the digital natives. The results of this study also indicated that user-generated media like political internet memes are an important influence in today's media environment, and have

implications for other forms of political outcomes, including concerns about opinion polarisation, civic discourse, and the public sphere.

The study, 'The Affect And Effect Of Internet Memes: Assessing Perceptions And Influence Of Online User-generated Political Discourse As Media' (Heidi E. Huntington, Colorado State University) presents one method for conducting quantitative research with internet memes, including generating a sample from existing internet memes, and for considering political memes' effects as media.

The popularity of memes in general as devices of humour, cultural resonance and identity representations suggests that the appropriation of cyberculture for localised political means does have a potential for socialising citizens to become critical of the status quo as part of a more extensive network of political action. ('Online Political Memes and Youth Political Engagement, in Singapore', T.T. Sreekumar, Shobha Vadrevu, National University of Singapore, Singapore).

Commonly dismissed as mundane and pointless, satirical memes are a pure form of bottom-up expression and a useful source of political criticism. Political memes satirising politics are a form of public commentary; as a medium for self-expression, memes are employed to satirise politics while also providing entertainment. Such memes seem to carry other implications for politics as well; due to their nature, they are easy to create, consume and spread. As a result, they provide entry points to the complex realm of politics, making it more inclusive, more accessible, and more democratic. (Vasiliki Plevriti, 'Satirical User-Generated Memes as an Effective Source of Political Criticism, Extending Debate and Enhancing Civic Engagement', University of Warwick).

This study aims to view memes as a tool for political communication and gauge the influence of political memes on the audience's pre-existing political perception and mindset.

An associated communication theory which explains the effect of communication through memes is the Agenda Setting Theory. Bernard Cohen (1963) stated: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."

Similarly Memetics is the technique by which memes are transmitted. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. The main concept taken by evolutionary memetics from genetics is however that of replication: just as DNA strands replicate by producing identical copies of themselves with an inevitable rate of mutation, which allows for evolution -- so memes would replicate themselves in order to be transmitted from bearer to bearer.

### **Primary Data Analysis: Methodology**

The study will be done using Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis, under which methods like Content Analysis and Survey will be used. For the survey, questionnaires were given out to respondents for the statistical representation of the findings in the study.

#### **1. Content analysis**

It is the method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner to measure variables. This method will help in evaluating political memes as content, as it is a vast space and content analysis will limit the size of the study. Moreover, it will aid in defining the area one is working upon and not let misconstrued information irrelevant to one's research exist. The same content can be used in multiple contexts and hence can be difficult to interpret objectively. 10 of the most popular memes of 2018 to 2019 are chosen on the basis of the number of likes and comments on the memes indicating the notion that people understand and interpret those memes, and have certain reactions towards it.

The analysis will be done on:

1. Memes portraying a particular Indian political party.
2. Memes portraying a particular Indian politician.
3. Memes showing political issues in the Indian context.
4. Comments posted on certain political memes of different political ideologies.

The three broad themes for analysis

1. What does the meme portray?
2. What are the underlying meanings of the particular political meme?
3. What is the perception of the audience pertaining to the meme in question? (Comments analysis)

## 2. Survey

It is the method for collecting information or data as reported by individuals. Surveys are questionnaires (or a series of questions) that are administered to research participants who answer the questions themselves. This method is particularly helpful in this research as analyzing the effects of memes on the audience can only be done by reaching out to the target audience through questionnaire. It will help in analysing whether political memes help in moulding perceptions of the audience pertaining to political issues. Also, to gauge whether and how memes have become an easy tool to affect the audience's political perception.

10 questions will be included in the questionnaire to analyse the effects of Indian political memes on the audience. This method will help in understanding the influence of memes on the audience related to political issues in India. The research sampling method that will be used in this study is convenience sampling to obtain a more scientific result that can be used to represent the entirety of the audience viewing memes in NCR. 100 respondents will be randomly selected for this purpose from the National Capital Region. The women and men from age groups 18-25 years are the primary respondents of the research. Convenience sampling was used since it is not possible to gauge which people are interested in memes and respond to it. However, age groups 18-25 are more active on social media and thus were chosen for the study.

### Content Analysis

#### 1. 'Inka koi galti nahi hai, Theek hai?'



This meme shows two prominent political figures, Sonia Gandhi and Ex-Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh. The meme says that it is not his fault anymore as the political party, Congress is not in power and is the largest opposition party in the current scenario.

BJP had made promises in 2014 elections when it came into power and could not live up to the expectations of the Indian 'janta'. So this meme is particularly significant in showing the difference between the tenure of Congress PM Manmohan previously and why he was called out on his wrongs, while 'Bhakts' is still not agreeing to listen to the active uproar against BJP and it's wrongdoings with PM Narendra Modi merely questioned by this meme.

The comments on the meme range from people criticising BJP for not achieving the goals they had set in their election mandate to some people praising Dr Manmohan Singh for being one of the most intellectual and respectful people in power. Other comments, merely troll him for being silent. One of the comments which is particularly striking is a person wanting to vote for BJP again despite the backlash it has received. This goes to show that there are people fixated on political parties despite negative commentary on them through memes.

#### 2. 'Is this a co-incidence?'



PM Narendra Modi is shown in this meme, with his hand upholding the bio of his twitter account. The caption of the meme is, "Narendra bhai ne krupa ki", which is satirical as he has been equated to a God-like figure who

bestows his blessing on the masses whereas he is nowhere close to it. The bio is interesting as mentioned in the comments by AIB itself to trigger attention to what is written on it.

Some of the comments range from explaining the audience itself that what is the significance of ‘2,002 Following’, that is that the Godhra riots took place in the year 2002, in Gujarat. A few comments describe the brutality of the riots and what happened in Gujarat during a 3-day period. Thus, the meme was able to show a political issue of the past using simple methods of creation, amplifying the particular thought process to bring attention to the atrocities that happened in 2002, which go unnoticed or unremembered today.

3. ‘Tum kya mast kaam karta hai Modi bhai’



In this meme, Mr Rahul Gandhi is seen hugging PM Narendra Modi. This meme has been made from the footage taken from the Lok Sabha session on 20th July 2018.

It is believed that Mr Gandhi used this tactic as a way to show the contrast in the styles of governance between him and PM Narendra Modi. It is also felt that this public display of affection was done in retaliation to the speeches made by Narendra Modi against the Gandhi family, making a mockery of their contribution to the Indian state. It was to emphasise on the point that his political rivalry with Narendra Modi did not extend to hatred. However, his gesture has been criticised by his opponents and speaker of the house, Sumitra Mahajan as breaking the decorum of the house and going against the formal code of conduct. However, has been appraised by allies gone awry like Shiv Sena leader, Sanjay Raut.

We can see in the meme itself that his embrace lacks the expression it was contended to make and also shows PM Modi in an awkward state, re-emphasising on the point that it was merely a political strategy employed by Mr Gandhi to get back to his political rivals and reinstate his power as the prominent leader of the opposition. Moreover, it was to reclaim his authority whereas, in the popularised notion, he is seen as incompetent. The text on the picture, ‘Tum kya mast kaam karta hai’, is one of satire and illusionary friendship between the two leaders. The satirical notion is that no such credible work is being done by Narendra Modi to which Rahul Gandhi can accolade him and at the same time creates the rhetoric of the so-called bond they share.

The comments on the meme range from calling this act as ‘Pappu ki Jhappi’ to a more extreme stance of calling Rahul Gandhi a ‘dhongi baba’.

4. 'He spent our 5000 crores..'



This meme reflects on the fact that Narendra Modi spent a lot of money from the pockets of the taxpayers in India for his political campaign during the Delhi election and promised a grand manifesto.

Moreover, even today after winning the elections and been elected as the Prime Minister of India, he has done nothing according to most people and is spending a lot of money on his leisure and popularity. This meme also shows how an individual is penalised after he/she says anything against him in the case of defamation. Not only an ordinary individual is restricted from saying anything against him, but also the Indian media is not allowed to say anything against him if the government is being criticised for doing something wrong.

The comments in this meme range from people stating that Modi has wasted all their money to fill the pockets of the politicians leading India towards destruction and the destruction being so devastating that it will make the coming generations cry. Few people also argued that advertisements are an essential step to make people aware of new schemes and plans, but also that the news channels should not follow him blindly.

The underlying meaning of this meme is to show how our political system works and to what extent it fools the common people. Like here, Modi spending the Indian citizen's 5000 crore rupees to be seen on radio, newspaper, tv, and commercials, but these same platforms are prohibited from saying anything against him because no one is allowed to criticise him.

5. 'Modi 's New India'



This meme shows Narendra Modi and Mukesh Ambani standing together where Modi is pointing towards Ambani, and below this image, the four most prominent necessities of the people are written with each one of them owned by Mukesh Ambani. At the bottom it says, 'and fools think Modi is working for India' from which one can understand as to how Modi is working only for Ambani.

There are thousands of people who have viewed it and have given their opinion about it in the comments section. The comments vary from people saying that Ambani is running the Indian economy and Modi is just using his power to collect cash for himself, and Modi 'bhakts' have debated on this saying that they are the same people who are using free Jio net limitlessly 24\*7. Modi 'Bhakts' are favouring Ambani and saying that he has done a lot for Indians and has helped in giving employment. Moreover, people started listing scams by other government formed, like Congress, just to defend Modi and Ambani. Therefore, this meme shows two aspects of a system and how different people react to it.

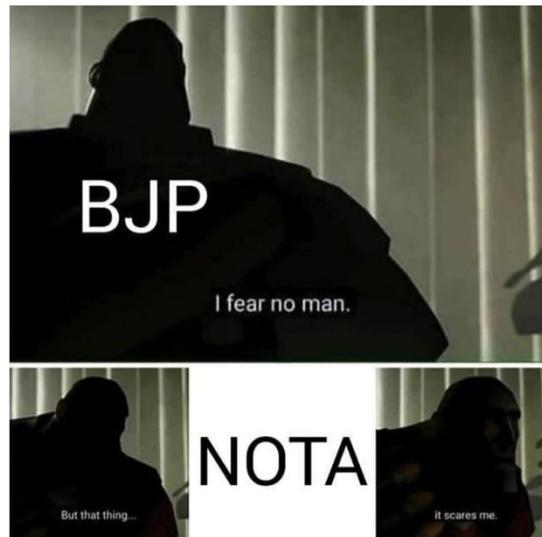
6. 'Please do remember us at least when you are hungry'



This meme shows the farmer's plight during Modi's tenure. The news does not cover their issues and focuses on war mongering during the Pulwama Attacks and Balakot Airstrike. It is a critique on Modi Ji's strategy on Balakot air strikes in Pakistan.

The comments ranged from people supporting the farmer's plight while some were supporting the hard stance on war taken by the BJP government.

7. BJP- 'I fear no man'



In the Madhya Pradesh State Elections, the Congress party won after securing the most number of votes after NOTA (None of the above). This meme shows the Incredible superheroes silhouette depicting NOTA as the fear of BJP to lose elections.

8.



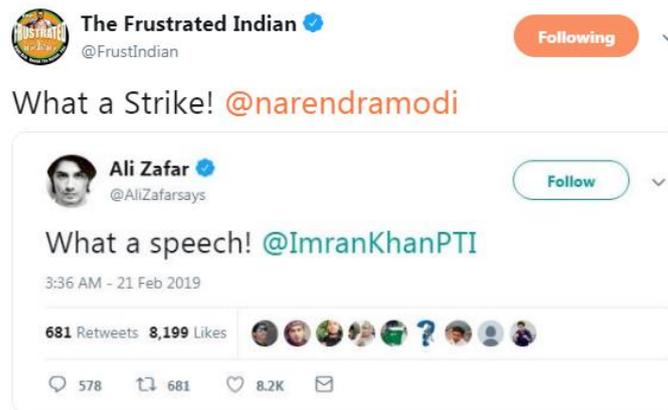
This is a more open-ended meme where the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru is laughing on the current PM Narendra Modi because of his failings during his tenure. His election campaign, 'Acche din aayenge', has not fulfilled their promises.

9. Chowkidar Narendra Modi



Amplifying his ‘Main bhi Chowkidar’ campaign before the general elections, his twitter handles name is changed as a statement to Nirav Modi and others who have corruption charges against them. This meme signifies the smart politics of Narendra Modi to garner support to win the elections.

10. ‘What a Strike! @narendramodi

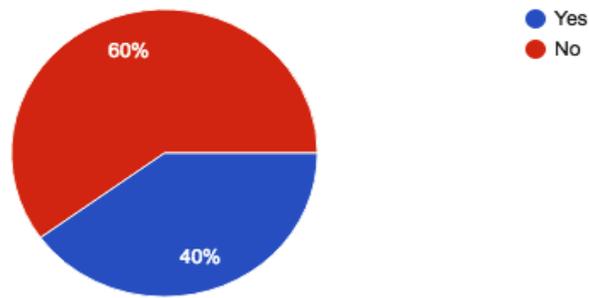


This meme shows the actor Ali Zafar praising PM of Pakistan, Imran Khan’s speech where on the other hand, a page on facebook, is retorting by praising the Balakot strike in response to Pulwama terror attacks. Since the actor is Pakistani, and the Indian government has banned Pakistani actors from partaking in Bollywood, he received a lot of criticism for praising the PM of Pakistan. He received trolls and hate messages.

**Observation: Survey Analysis**

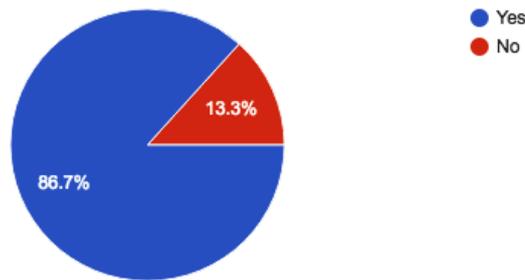
A majority of the respondents, i.e. 70% understood what the memes depicted and explained the underlying meaning of it too. However, 60% of them felt that the ‘Modi’s New India’ meme was not giving the right message.

Q.1 Do you feel the meme mentioned above is giving the right message?



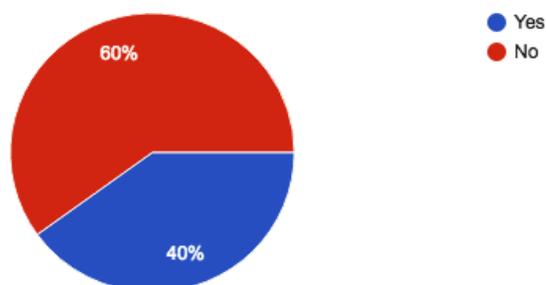
After seeing the ‘Tum kya mast kaam karta hai Modi bhai’ meme, more than 85% of the respondents were able to place the context of the meme as represented by the news about it. Thus, the meme became an easy tool for disseminating political issues to the audience.

Q.2 Do you know what this meme is about?



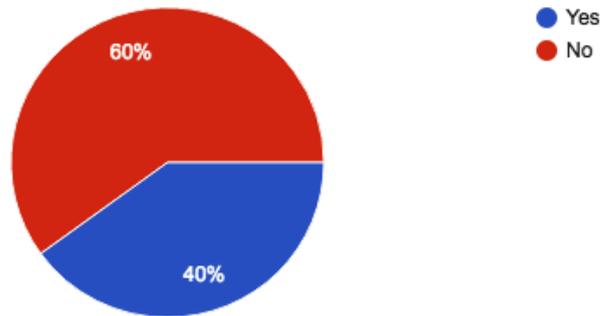
60% people did not understand what the comment made by AIB on a meme showcasing PM Modi, however after reading the comments understood the context of it being in relation to Gujarat Riots.

Q.3 When AIB commented on this meme, ‘When you see it’, did you understand what they meant by it?



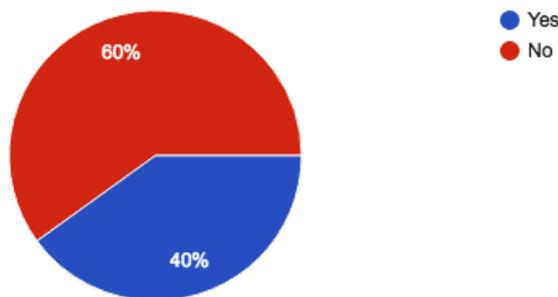
Only 40% of the respondents found the meme humorous. It appealed these particular respondents because it was poking fun at the regime in charge and allowed to showcase a deeper meaning of self-proclamation and narcissism of the PM of India.

Q.4 Did you find the aforementioned meme humorous?



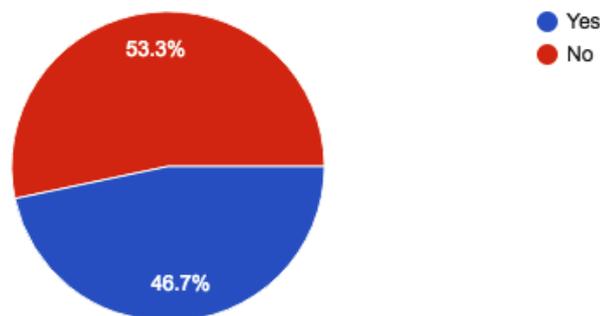
40% of the audience understood which issue was being shown by the 'He spent our 5000 cr' meme and were able to explain the political issue being talked about in relevance to the current political scenario.

Q.5 This meme talks about a significant issue. Could you identify this issue?



Around 50% of the audience would forward the meme on 'Truth in Hike..' to their family, friends or relatives.

Q.6 Will you forward this meme to your friends/family/relatives etc.?



Various comments were made on what the respondents felt about the meme culture which ranged from meme being an easier way for the youth to understand political issues than the data itself. However, it also stated that it is more likely to manipulate a meme so that a different meaning can be taken out. Two particularly nuanced

responses to the survey question about the meme culture were, “People say that with the saffronisation of the nation (overall) lynching incidents and other

Such negative incidents have increased in number, but it is not exactly true. These incidents took place under other governments as well, and the fact that BJP is seen as negative is also part of propaganda. As a generation of followers and taking in whatever is given to us I think it is necessary for us to be more aware of what is going on without just blindly propagating agendas that aren't always what they preach. Then there are people like me who are ashamed to be politically 'inactive' on social media platforms or not having polarised opinions. I honestly think that is better than supporting something you do not know the entire truth about. These are my personal opinions and in no way do I intend to hurt or shame any person or organisation.” Moreover, “I believe that memes have been able to create a trans-lingual culture of sorts wherein individuals from different walks of life can gauge the thin meaning of any important or significant event. It has been an important tool for spreading propaganda as well as for sarcastic jibes against the present dispensation. They have had an impact that only a few people could have fathomed and have made the internet a little more localised.”

### **Conclusion**

The Meme culture has roped in common man who was previously unaware of what's going on in the media (aka #Trending), but at the same time, the real picture is not shown conclusively which results in skewed perceptions. Also, memes should be well supported with facts.

It is believed that memes are not the right way to show political issues if actual statistics and figures do not back them. Memes should present authentic information regarding crucial issues for it to be a reliable source of information transmission. However, memes are a humorous way to express one's opinions and are essential forms of public information dispensing systems. They educate people on topics in which news coverage is limited and simplifies the information to one visual image giving more meaning. It can create a lot of controversy and clash, but an informed meme which is interpreted by many people can also create awareness about the political system and governance. Issues which are sidelined by the media, gain a presence in memes and bring forward political issues not highlighted by other sources of news dissemination.

The comments on the memes show a stream of dialogue between different individuals thus confirming the presence of memes as a tool of political communication. Such diversified views on political parties represented by memes show that memes reinforce political ideologies of individuals and do not shape their view or mindset. However, it is a useful tool for raising political issues as it depicts meaning in a small box, full of visual and text, interpreted in numerous ways. With time, the political discourse can be seen in the narrative of memes in 2018. They also lighten the mood of news presentation as it is disseminated as a 'joke'. However, it does not subtract the burden of truth, accuracy and brevity which most memes follow for creating awareness about political issues. There is scope of further research on the changing nature of political memes, the makers and users of memes and whether memes can change perceptions regarding political issues and not just influence one's mindset.

### **Limitations**

1. It focuses only on internet memes on Facebook and Instagram. It could have included other medium of memes like WhatsApp.
2. The recording of the memes was carried out only for 2-3 months because of paucity of time. It could be extended to more months of recording, which may have led to a better generalized result.

Because of the financial and time constraints the study has its own delimitation. The following are the delimitation of the study:

1. The sample size for the study is only 100.
2. The study included only those respondents who have a minimum qualification of higher secondary education and thus excluded those who are illiterate and below the higher secondary level of qualification.
3. It does not take into consideration memes before 2018. Only after this time period are the advertisements analysed.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Appendix**

Survey form link:

<https://forms.gle/M4EuktkFwFP5ecHX8>