

## Hate and Humor in a Conflict: The Study of Memes on the India and Pakistan Conflict

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Keywords	Abstract
Memos, Indo-Pak conflict, Thematic analysis.	<i>The conflict between India and Pakistan has been a heated debate for over seven decades since their independence from British rule. The masses from both the countries have expressed their feelings about the conflict and show support for their respective country through memes on social media. The memes frequently used in war and conflict could have spread more hatred among masses of the countries. This study focuses on understanding the themes and tones used in the memes from both sides of the border. Thematic analysis of selected memes yielded the themes of belittling the enemy, trivialisation of conflict, references to history, warmongering, jingoism, division and distrust, and peace-building. Though the hatred by mocking others, showing superiority and provocation were the prevalent themes in most of the memes from both India and Pakistan: few of the memes attempted to normalise the situation and tried to spread the message of peace between the two countries. This study provides insight into how user-generated content can serve as a tool for both conflict escalation and de-escalation.</i>

## INTRODUCTION

Memos are a versatile genre on social media platforms. They are recent addition to the means of communication and spread of information and opinions in light-hearted manners. These memes typically aim at the latest global happenings or events related to political, cultural, and social phenomena. Dawkins (1976) has established meme as a cultural unit that imitates another meme, and thus it becomes at a stretch communication. He explains that “the motive of every meme is to attain fidelity, fecundity, and longevity”. Much later, Jenkins et al. (2013) characterised internet memes as “spreadable media”. The effectiveness of memes lies in their potential to appeal to the minds and spirits of diverse audiences and the flexibility in their interpretation in varied ways and draw out their implications (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

Memos are being used as tools of expression during protests (Moussa et al., 2020), crises (Aslan, 2021; Murru & Vicari, 2021; Ponton, 2021), and wars and conflicts (Szwed, 2016; Wiggins, 2016) as well. This research mainly focuses on the practice, treatment, and diversified importance of social media memes in conflict situations. For this purpose, it specifies the memes generated in India and Pakistan after the incident of the ‘Pulwama attack’ in February, 2019. Several memes were generated and circulated from both sides to tease the other country humorously during the conflict between India and Pakistan in 2019.

## **Phenomena of Memes**

A meme propagates different ideas from socio-cultural behavior in the form of texts, videos, and pictures. Initially, Dawkins (1976), an evolutionary biologist, coined the term 'meme' in his famous book, "The Selfish Gene," in 1976. He has explained that just as human genes serve as the replicator in humans in the same manners memes replicate ideas and concepts. He further elucidates it as an idea that "leaps from brain to brain" just like a natural genetic trait. Meme also conveniently fits in the environment by forming a cluster (Mermelstein, 2016).

Huntington (2013) explains a meme as 'a useful tool for internet users to shape and declare their identity and to participate in discourse related to events in the media'. While Shifman (2013, p. 367) defined memes as 'units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process'. Memes have become an integral part of social media interactions for shared cultural experiences globally. They are quicker form of communication (Grudlingh, 2018); even news is being circulated through memes, and they have become a tool of political rhetoric as well (Rastogi & Kashyap, 2019). Over the time, memes have become the most popular phenomenon on social media platforms in Pakistan.

## **Memes and Conflict**

Marijan (2018) explains that social media has a significant impact on both an individual and society in terms of communication, interaction, and understanding the world. Like traditional media, social media may also promote controversy and manipulation of facts and figures, thus diminishing the chances for peace. The falseness and double standards are becoming vital components in social media over the time (Baccarella et al., 2018; Kumar & Shah, 2018). Memes are an integral artefact on social media platforms, and their presence during war and conflict is a known phenomenon. Sebba-Elran and Milo (2016) considering memes as a new phenomenon in situations of conflict, not only to exert power and control but also as an attempt to subdue the opponent. Thus, it becomes a tool of propaganda. Social media users also jeered at the conflict between Israel and Iran and shared their opinion and support through different kinds of meme. These jokes, shared in support of Iran, were not only a humorous commentary on the conflict but also a mechanism that reinforced the power structures and framed the contested geo-cultural background of Israel.

Singer and Brooking (2018) assert that social media has transformed to the extent that it has become a conflicted platform itself. They have illustrated by examples how Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) used Twitter to locate the places for their airstrike. These new tactics illustrate how social media has become a battleground that has decisively reshaped the modern world.

Most significantly, memes have given voice to the citizens of conflicted zones and have given a cryptic way of propagating their opinion and thinking, irrespective of being censured for it, like it was done during the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Wiggins, 2016). This study also highlights the use of memes by the citizens on both sides in the wake of a conflict situation between India and Pakistan.

## **Background of India and Pakistan Relations**

Relations between India and Pakistan have been unstable and stressful since the time of Partition in 1947, sometimes because of political deadlocks and other times due to military escalation. Though they are neighbors and share common social and cultural values, there are many factors leading to the persistent deadlocks and hostilities between them. The turbulence

in their relation is because of issue of Kashmir, which prevents both the countries from giving attention to the development of their social structures (Sandeep et al., 2015). Besides, the Kashmir issue both countries keep on indulging in violent and aggressive episodes of bilateral relations, where they blame each other for the terrorist activities in their land. The Pulwama attack was another such episode.

On February 14, 2019, the attack on the Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) in Pulwama district of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir immediately led to an outbreak between India and Pakistan. Within days that outbreak converted into a war-like situation, and mutual threats of using nuclear weapons were made. The threat of nuclear war between the two nations intensified the whole situation. Even in such a tense situation, there was an instant surge of memes on social media from both the sides. People on both the sides expressed their opinions in these memes. This study examines the national and patriotic aspects as well as the concepts and themes used in these memes regarding the Indo-Pak conflict.

A study disclosed that the probability of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan would be disastrous, with an estimated killing of 50-125 million people (Robock et al., 2019). It can easily trigger ice-age temperatures, causing global starvation and climatic diversity. This destruction would not only be confined to the subcontinent or Asia, but the whole world would also catch its massive and fatal effects (Robock et al., 2019). Despite an expected irreparable destruction in the case of a war between India and Pakistan, both countries have reached the brink of disastrous situations many times. In each such occurrence, the media on both sides intensified and manipulated the situation to turn people against each other (Bose, 2011). In recent years, people on both sides have expressed their opinions through memes accordingly. These memes have the potential to either initiate nuclear war through mockery or halt the disaster through their humour. Amidst the threats of nuclear disaster, it is essential to study memes as a new form of expression.

The diversity of opinion and intensity of expression across borders are observed in these memes to make a comparison of their reactions towards the same issues. For example, a bleak situation is taken with an intense seriousness on one side, while on the other, it is treated with a relaxed, witty attitude in memes. We investigate the behavior of people on both sides regarding conflict through their expression in memes. We investigated nationalism, patriotism, and hatred in social media memes regarding the Indo-Pak conflict. For this purpose, we posed the following research questions.

**RQ1.** What are the themes expressed in social media memes regarding the India-Pakistan conflict?

**RQ2.** What kind of tone is used in these memes?

## **METHODOLOGY**

For this study, memes related to the conflict between India and Pakistan after the Pulwama attack of 2019 were collected from the top search results of Google and different social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

These memes were collected not only from the Pakistani side but also from the Indian side to eliminate bias. 100 memes were selected based on a higher ratio of comments. The researchers have observed the memes in the way they are presented and assigned different codes to develop themes using reflexive thematic analysis.

## Thematic Analysis

Braun & Clarke (2012) described thematic analysis as a method that systematically identifies, organises, and gives meaning (themes) to the data. This method is flexible and accessible, as it is a systematic and organised analysis of the collected data to develop codes and themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) developed six steps for thematic analysis. This research has also used the same six steps for reflexive thematic analysis.

### 1. Familiarising with the Data

In the first step, memes as the main source of data were observed, and initial notes were jotted down systematically. This practice also helped question the data, find reasoning in it, and understand what the memes mean. Ultimately, the data made sense.

### 2. Generating Codes

After familiarisation with the data, the next step was to generate codes from the collected memes. For that, researchers carefully reviewed the selected memes. Then, short labels were given by combining the similar meanings developed from the data relevant to the research questions. After a proper evaluation of the data, the codes were generated, which are as follows:

1. Contempt, 2. Ridicule, 3. Bollywood, 4. Teasing, 5. Us and Them, 6. Media Distrust, 7. Revulsion, 8. Humour, 9. Arbitration, 10. Provoking war, 11. Patriotism, 12. Pride, 13. Superiority, 14. Cricket/sports, 15. Warning, 16. Past Experiences, 17. Accusation, 18. Frivolousness and 19. Redirection.

Among these codes, some may seem very similar to each other, like contempt, ridicule, and teasing. However, in memes, they appear differently.

### 3. Developing Themes

After generating codes, themes were developed based on those codes. In this process, the codes were reviewed, and overlapping codes were discarded. The remaining codes were used to generate themes. The established themes essentially reflected the answer to the research questions. The themes were broader than the codes, as more than one code was combined into a single theme.

### 4. Refinement of Themes

After developing the themes, they were also reviewed to assess the quality of the work and relate it to the data which has been collected. To eliminate any misconceptions regarding themes, we excluded and included some themes.

### 5. Giving Names to the Themes

In the final step, we gave labels to the themes for their convenient understanding and defined the actual meaning of that theme. We also established the purpose and reason for using that theme for the study. After giving proper names, these memes were rearranged and organised for the analysis. Based on the codes, we named our themes as follows in Table 1.

**Table 1: Themes Identified in the Memes Regarding Indo-Pak Conflict**

<b>CODES</b>	<b>THEMES</b>
2. Ridicule, 4. Teasing, 1. Contempt, 7. Revulsion	Belittling the Enemy
3. Bollywood, 14. Cricket/Sports, 10. Provoking War,	Trivialisation of Conflict

18. Frivolousness	
16. Past Experiences	References to History
15. Warning, 10. Provoking War, 17. Accusation	Warmongering
11. Patriotism, 12. Pride, 13. Superiority	Jingoism
5. Us and Them, 6. Media Distrust	Division and Distrust
8. Humour, 9. Arbitration, 19. Redirection	Peace-building

## 6. Writing the Report

In the final step, we discussed the themes with the help of relevant examples from the data, provided proper, valid reasoning, and evaluated the hidden aspects of memes. The related data set was discussed to address the research questions and draw conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the study, we selected one hundred memes and conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to determine their themes and tone.

### 1. Belittling the Enemy

This theme, “belittling the enemy”, grasped the memes that attempted to dishonour and disgrace the enemy by craking jokes at them. Social media has become a platform for expressing power, thus reshaping the modern world battlefield (Singer & Brookings, 2018). In this study, we have found memes being used as a tool of power by inflicting humiliation on the opponent. Such memes represented the intensity of malignancy present on both sides of the border. It also showed the baseless bashing of people. They were arguing and criticising each other without any reason, mocking and insulting their nationality through those memes. Both sides display power and superiority by declaring the other as foolish, incapable, and incompetent to fight with each other. Such behavior is evident in many of the memes produced on both sides.



**Figure 1**

Figure 1 is a meme produced in Pakistan, and it makes fun of the Indian army and portrays the incompetence of the Indian air force. Figure 2 is a meme from the Indian side that also points out the incompetence of the Pakistani air force. It shows a toy or inferior aircraft presumably owned by the Pakistani Air Force, which makes it a powerless enemy, with no muscle to fight against the mighty Indian forces. The creator of this meme is trying to underscore the unseen towering power of the Indian Air Force that can intimidate the other side for having no preparation.

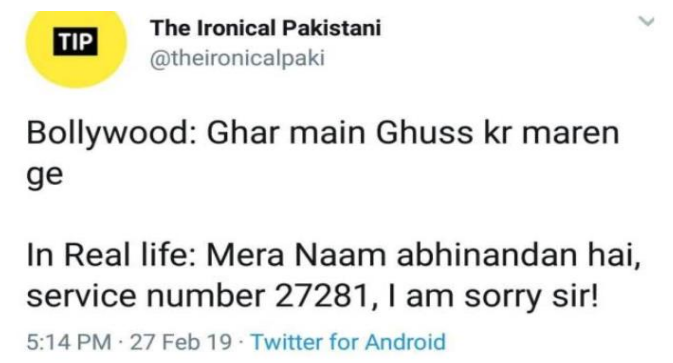


**Figure 2**

## 2. Trivialisation of Conflict

‘Trivialisation of the conflict’ is taken as normalisation of conflict and non-seriousness towards war like situations. This theme encapsulates the irresponsible behavior of Indian and Pakistani people, evident in their memes. Social media memes have the potential to normalise and trivialise conflict (Asmolov, 2021; Stall et al., 2023), thus becoming a modern tool of propaganda and warfare (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019).

The situation of conflict is so intense between India and Pakistan that it is projected in their movies and media as well. We can see the frustration and anger in sports too, especially cricket, where every cricket match between them becomes a mini battlefield where players and the audience are fighting both for their pride. Now, memes have emerged as a new avenue of this conflict, and there were references to movies in many of these memes, while other memes can be seen showing the influence of sports, particularly cricket.



**Figure 3**

Figure 3 refers to the Bollywood movie ‘Phantom’, in which a retired army officer utters the dialogue “Hum ghar mein ghuss ke marenge” (we will enter their home and hit them), suggesting an operation to enter Pakistan and eliminate Hafiz Saeed, the leader of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), who is alleged to be the mastermind behind terrorist activities in India. In this meme, this dialogue is linked to the capture of Indian Air Force Pilot Abhinandan by Pakistani forces during an aerial fight in 2019. Abhinandan was later released as a peace gesture by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. Figure 4 shows a tweet by Bollywood superstar Shahrukh Khan welcoming him back. A reply from a Pakistani user went viral, referencing a dialogue from Shahrukh Khan’s film. The dialogue was, “Aaj barson mein pehli baar Pakistan ne dosti ka haath barhaya hai; aaj haath peechay hatanay ka matlab aglay



70 saal ki dushmani” (Today Pakistan has extended the hand of friendship after years; turning it away now could lead to another 70 years of hostility between the two nations).

After the recent conflict between India and Pakistan, Bollywood ceased to cast Pakistani actors in movies because of immense pressure heaped upon it by people. In the sports, Pakistan refused to take part in the Kabaddi World Cup match hosted by India (Pasricha, 2016). This shows the deep hatred rooted in the Indo-Pak relationship and how this hatred ultimately ruins the possible development in relations other than diplomatic ties.



Figure 4

The meme in Figure 5 makes a comparison of Indian cricket bowlers with Indian fighter pilots. No ball in cricket because of crossing the crease is equated to the crossing of Pakistani airspace. The reference to cricket and Bollywood in memes highlights the dual nature of the situation. On the one hand, it trivialises the conflict by blending it with sports and entertainment and on the other hand, it reflects the deep-rooted tensions between the two nations, showing how political and military disputes extend even into sports and cinema.

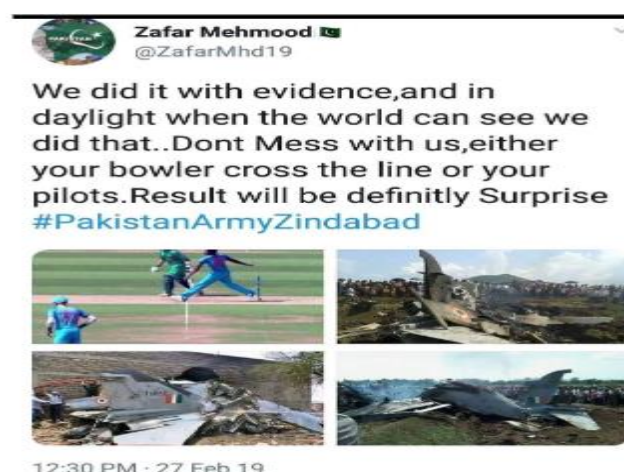


Figure 5

### 3. Reference to History

Decades-old hostility between India and Pakistan is full of historical and political events. People from both sides use historical events in their memes to mock and taunt each other. Such memes are unjustifiably stuck in the past and are then related to the present

situation. This persistent attitude restrained them from taking any step forward towards building peace.

Since the partition, biased information about the history has been spread across the borders through the curriculum. This crooked presentation of events and their history has poisoned the minds of people; therefore, it is difficult for them to think freely.

In Figure 6, the meme refers to history in a taunting way. It mentions “Sham ki Chaye” (the evening tea), which is a reference to the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. Atique (2016) describes that during the 1965 war, which started on September 6, Indian soldiers crossed the Burki sector into Pakistan. In presumably high spirits, the senior officers of the Indian Army looked forward to enjoying a cup of tea in Lahore, but their dream did not come true. After the Pulwama attack, when their arrested pilot was offered a cup of tea, it was ironically commented on in this meme that “after 44 years, finally, an Indian soldier fulfilled his dream of enjoying tea in Lahore”.

The meme in Figure 7 from the Indian side reflects another historical event that occurred after the 1971 war, when Pakistani soldiers surrendered to the Indian Army. This meme conveyed a sense of superiority that they enjoyed once. It shows how the concept of power is depicted, while surrender is used in this meme in a connotative way.



Figure 6



Figure 7

People from both countries have not left behind the sardonic references of the past. Such revengeful attitudes maintained a strong wall between them, never helping towards a mutually peaceful relationship. Memes reflected all these attitudes. Coker (2008) explains that memes are a means of cultural exchange, but in the situation of war, they mostly transform into powerful and strong expressions.



#### 4. Warmongering

This was the most prevalent theme present in the memes and overlapped with other themes in terms of codes. Provocation of war in the form of warnings and threats was openly added in such memes. A report by Pew (2011) validates that 65% of Indians have a negative opinion about Pakistan, and 76% consider Pakistan a serious threat to India, while 65% of Pakistanis also give India an unfavourable rating and 74% consider India the biggest threat to Pakistan. This data augments the already discussed scenario of mutual relationships between the two countries. The hate is so widespread that many people on both sides consider war as the only option to eliminate the threat.



Figure 8

This meme in figure 8 expresses disgust and hatred for the people on the other side, provoking war with humiliating language. It suggests reconsidering the peaceful gesture of releasing arrested Indian pilot Abhinandan and also demands an apology from the Indian media while calling them shameless.

Figure 9 also represents hatred and revulsion for the others by using hateful statements such as terrorist nation, which shows the intensity of this revulsion. Though figure 10 is a humorous meme, it not only trivialises the war but also provokes it by saying, "Bhae jung karni hai tw phlay bta do phir ham exams ki tyari naa karyn" (if you want to have war, then let us know in advance so we don't have to prepare for our exams). The memes of this theme indicate the hatred between the two nations and represent the perspective of people spreading negativity on both sides of the border, thus provoking unfavourable conditions.



Figure 9

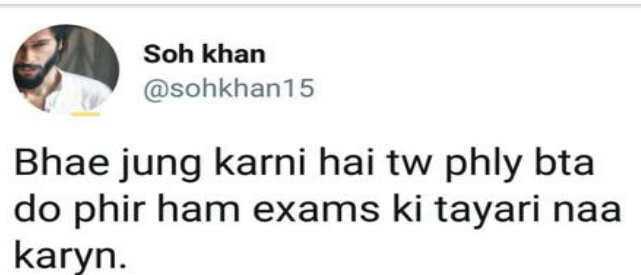


Figure 10

## 5. Jingoism

The theme of jingoism refers to showing the dominance and supremacy of one's own country over other nations and presenting others as inferior and powerless compared to themselves.



Figure 11

In Figure 11, there is a glimpse of superiority and domination in this meme, portraying Pakistan as a powerless and imprudent country. It addresses the Pakistani army as pine nuts: 'Tu hai kon bey chilgoze' (who the hell are you, pine nuts), which are very small in size. So it considers that the Pakistani army is so small in size, and the Indian Army, according to them, is unbeatable and supreme.

A strong sense of superiority is very much present on both sides of the India-Pakistan border. Both see each other as incapable of defeating them. Since Partition, both nations have pursued their selfish agendas. The feeling of domination over the other has always been a priority to assert oneself as a stronger opponent. Jacob (2018) cites an Indian officer, Syed Ata Hasnain, who disclosed that the concept of moral domination over the other is cultivated among soldiers. This mindset is indoctrinated in a way that soldiers internalise the belief of their superiority over the enemy. Users who generate these memes are also like these soldiers, having an evident sense of superiority, and they become social media warriors against each other.

## 6. Division and Distrust:

Skepticism and division are other themes prevalent in the selected memes. People on both sides have trust issues with each other and the mainstream media as well. As Marx and Engels (1998/1846) confirm, the media have a tendency to be biased, as they do not present the whole truth behind a story, and this creates mistrust among the public.

As we can see, Figure 12 illustrates distrust in the mainstream media by declaring them hypocrites. Figure 13 again displays the mistrust in media and also indicates manipulation by

mainstream media. In a warlike situation, the media has a huge responsibility to provide the unseen truth to the people, but in some cases, the media fuels the fire through its biased and framed information. Entman (2007) explains that mainstream media sometimes gives news that falsifies reality, and the news does not provide equal treatment to both sides in a conflict. Tsfaty and Peri (2006) explain that “media skepticism is manifest, for example, in the feeling that journalists betray their professional responsibilities and present slanted, inaccurate, or incomplete information”.

On one hand, people express distrust toward the media, criticising it for fake news and escalating the conflict. On the other hand, they create memes against the peace-building efforts between India and Pakistan. During the times of tension, people from both sides spread hatred and animosity. When expressed in memes, this attitude further intensifies the negativity between the two countries. It reflects the us vs. them rivalry between them.

## 7. Peacebuilding

Peace-building is a process of resolving the conflict between the two neighbouring countries, India and Pakistan. As anger and frustration are expressed through these memes, peace-building efforts are also presented through these popular memes. The meme in Figure 14 highlights a gesture of peace. While it was apprehended what would happen to the arrested Indian pilot Abhinandan, a Pakistani soldier is seen offering him a cup of tea.

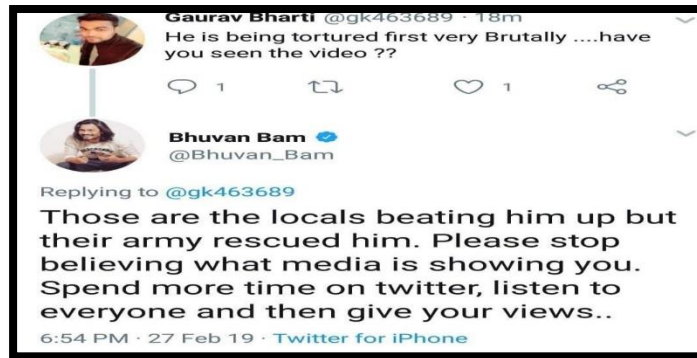
A hashtag, ‘say no to war’, was also commonly used in many of the selected memes. This hashtag epitomises the desire of common people to resolve the conflict. These memes prove that social media can play a more effective role in peace-building while there is negativity in traditional media. Memes as a means of communication can project a positive image of both sides by stabilising the situation with the help of humour and harmonious representations.



Figure 12



Figure 13



**Figure 14**

## CONCLUSION

The 2019 conflict between India and Pakistan gave rise to the practice of using memes on social media from both sides. These memes reflected mainly the emotional reactions of Indian and Pakistani people towards each other. From the beginning, both countries have shared a hostile relationship shaped by complex factors. A biased curriculum devised in academic institutes (Lall, 2008); hateful and erroneous representation of historical and political facts in the films (Bharat & Kumar, 2008), videos, and documentaries; and an unjustified criticism - all these elements nourished the already existing enmity between the two countries.

The memes analysed in the study expressed the element of superiority and domination present on both sides. In most of these memes, the concepts of hypernationalism, continuous rivalry, hatred, and upholding of patriotism were visible. The tone of the memes was also derogatory, negative, non-serious, and provocative. Most of them provoked war, spread hatred, made allegations of incompetence, and taunted others as losers.

As we know, India and Pakistan are both nuclear powers. One nuclear attack by any of the sides would not only destroy the entire area but would also greatly affect the whole world. Threats of using nuclear weapons from both sides usually serve intimidating purposes, but they hardly look for implications. Within such circumstances, memes can play an effective role, better than any other genre in media. Memes from both sides projected rage and anger towards each other, but they also used streaks of satire, wit, and humour. This combination or amalgamation may pacify a tense situation, and an extreme reaction may be avoided. However, the continuous practice of wit and humour in memes regarding serious matters may gradually reduce their impact.

Memes, if created by talented, knowledgeable, and peace-loving people, can play an effective role as a mediator between two countries at war. They can help stabilise and normalise the situation with their content and can change the mood of rage into love for peace on both sides. With their light-hearted themes, memes can be used to educate people to respect each other. With similar cultural and historical roots, it would not be a difficult task.

## Implications and Recommendations

This study provides insight into how user-generated content can serve as a tool for both conflict escalation and de-escalation. It highlights the tone and themes in the memes generated in a conflict and illustrates the potential of memes to be used as a tool of soft power and diplomacy. This study also underscores the need for digital media literacy programmes among young media users so they can critically evaluate and engage with the digital content. However, this study focused on the content of memes; future studies can also investigate the

effects of these memes on consumers and establish the distinction between warmongering and peace-building memes in terms of their effects.

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