ELECTION MEMES AS PERFORMING ARTS: AESTHETIC STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL MISINFORMATION IN RAJASTHAN

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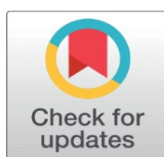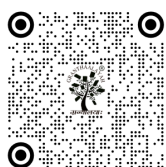
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ABSTRACT

This paper research explores the concept of election memes as a new kind of performing arts that tactically constructs political meaning, emotionality, and information flow misconstructions in Rajasthan. Although memes are commonly defined as humorous digital artefacts, this paper has proposed them as micro-performances, aesthetic events, which are designed to integrate folklore signals, dramaturgical and multimodal symbolism into persuasive political stories. In this sense, election memes are participatory and not merely aesthetical commentary, mobilisation of identities and dissemination of ideological affect. The study relies on digital folklore, semiotics, and performance theory in order to trace the way in which exaggeration, parody, satire, and symbolic motifs code political misinformation. A collection of memes of the Rajasthan election was collected using prominent social media, and then a three-level analysis was performed: (i) visual/semiotic dissection, (ii) textual sentiment and framing analysis of narratives, and (iii) computational clustering of aesthetic and thematic elements. The results demonstrate that meme misinformation works with culturally-instilled aesthetics mechanisms, which include regional humour, folk, and emotionally-charged caricatures, which ensure virality and credibility. Analysis of audience reception also indicates that youth, rural electorate, and partisan audiences are consuming these memes as performances of belonging that tend to support existing prejudices and add to a digital theatre of persuasion.

Keywords: Political Memes, Performing Arts, Misinformation, Rajasthan Elections, Digital Folklore, Visual Semiotics

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern India, mass media campaigns have become more and more diverse than the traditional rallies, speeches, and manifestos, incorporating a relatively active and imaginatively saturated digital culture that memes are a leading means of communication. In some states, especially in Rajasthan, where the politics of the land is heavily threaded through with local folklores, performance and symbolic narration, the meme has become a cultural artefact that in addition to entertainment convinces, mobilises, and deceives. Not just funny pictures, election memes are performances: choreographed aesthetic events that can invite audiences to laugh, share, react and engage in political stories emotionally. This performative aspect places memes between art and communication, as well as propaganda, requiring both media theorists and the cultural biologist to be analytic. Digital misinformation has altered the forms through which publics are exposed to political reality. The visual communication as a concise, humorous, emotionally charged message has become an effective means of perception shaping López-Paredes and Carrillo-Andrade (2022). Memes, particularly the ones shared on such platforms as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and X (previously Twitter) are consumed very fast and quickly and often, acting like a mini theatrical performance staged in the sphere of a daily digital interaction. This is increased in the election environment of Rajasthan by the tradition of folk satire, puppetry, caricature, oral storytelling and communal humour that were long-established in the state. Through this, the election memes in the region do not enter the region as alien digital entities but are easily assimilated into the repertoires of known and accepted culture which increases the persuasive and affective powers of the memes Jaballah (2025). In this paper, I will argue that memes are micro-performances, short but effective simulations that simulate political situations, exaggerate characters, mock adversaries and create emotional appeals. Their dramaturgy is based on the visual symbolism, parody, hyperbole, and layering of text and image, which is multimodal. Although the aesthetic methods can be used to create political commentary and civic action, they also have the resources to strengthen misinformation, categorize groups, and distort the people in comprehending electoral matters Liçenji (2023). The aesthetics, cultural, and emotional layers influencing the performance of political memes are depicted in Figure 1. Memes therefore become vehicles of political action on whose aesthetic merits the artistic ideal of ideological positioning and information disorder serves.
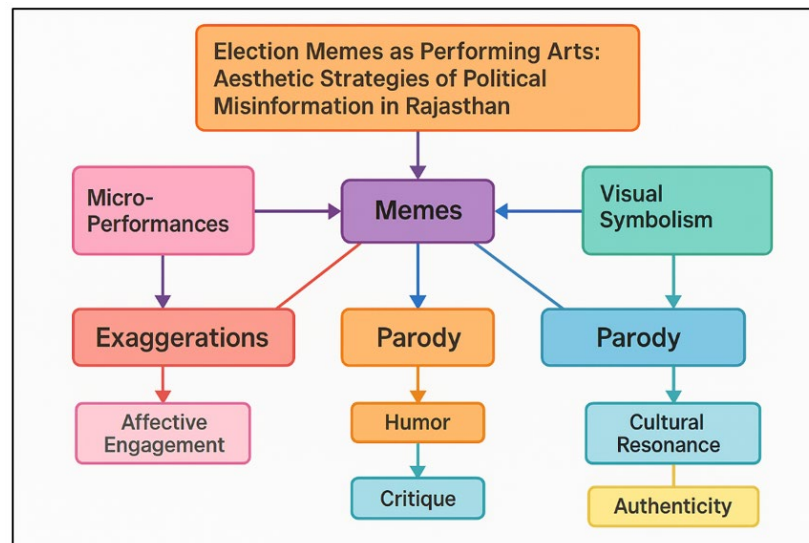
Figure 1

Figure 1 Framework of Election Memes as Performing Arts in Rajasthan's Digital Misinformation Ecosystem

Local humour attracts intensively to local idioms, costume, settings, and folk characters, which are often re-packaged in political memes to create both familiarity and entertainment. These aesthetics codes also engage audiences to participate: users can interpret, edit, share, and reuse meme templates in a manner that is analogous to improvisational performance in more traditional arts Klein and Robison (2020). The meme is turned into a platform, the user into an actor, and the political actors are turned into digital theatre actors of the stage of representations and mockery. In this changing media landscape where falsehoods flourish not as a result of overt propaganda but by the thinly veneered narrative framing of humour. Laughter, outrage, and collective connection increase the virality of the meme and break the borders between truth and fiction Altamirano-Benítez et al. (2022).

2. BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS
2.1. MEMES WITHIN DIGITAL FOLKLORE AND PERFORMATIVE ARTS THEORY

In modern digital societies, memes serve the same function that folklore has in traditional cultures: they are shared, adaptive, communal stories that circulate through social groups and have their forms and significance changed. The memes in the political life of Rajasthan are quite regional symbols, the style of humour, or folk narrative traditions, reflecting the participatory nature of the oral story-telling, puppetry, satire, or communal performance Olan et al. (2024). The digital folklore theory focuses on communities as a collective producer, remixers and distributors of cultural artefacts that serve as a representation of common values, tensions and identities. Election memes are players in the same dynamic context, with users jointly creating micro-narratives, which address local political facts. The theory of performative arts continues this interpretation by emphasizing that these memes are performances but not texts Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021). A meme is a kind of mini-play or gesture, or expressive hint, a theatrical vignette that asks the audience to respond, whether through laughter, satire, confirmation, or anger. The repetitive sharing and interaction is an act of participation that turns memes into performative events that influence political behaviour Papathanassopoulos and Giannouli (2025).

2.2. SEMIOTICS, DRAMATURGY, AND MULTIMODAL AESTHETICS IN POLITICAL CONTENT

Semiotics is an important methodological tool that would be essential in the analysis of the communicative layers involved in election memes. Every visual component colour, gesture, symbol, costume, space setting, is a sign which has cultural connotations. Such signs are usually in pairs: the signifier (image or phrase) and the signified (political meaning) constitute a semiotic system, which predisposes how the viewer will interpret the signifier subconsciously Rúas Araujo et al. (2022). This is enhanced by dramaturgy in terms of framing memes as mini-performances through which political struggles are fought, behaviours exaggerated, leaders placed in archetypal roles of a hero, villain, trickster, or fool. Memes dramatise the issues of elections through parody, mimicry and caricature. Memes form an emotional script, and can affect the way viewers allocate blame, loyalty or admiration. The persuasiveness of memes is enhanced by the use of multimodal aesthetics, such as imagery, typography, colour palettes and short captions Godoy-Guevara et al. (2025). Narrative meaning is based on text, whereas images produce immediate affect. Dissonance between images and verbals frequently creates the humour of the meme, which produces a performative punchline to support the intended political message.

2.3. MISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS: DIGITAL PROPAGANDA, VIRALITY, AFFECT

Election memes are shared in a larger systems of misinformation that are influenced by political interests, platform algorithm and audience patterns. The digital propaganda does not depend on long-form content very often nowadays; more often, it uses short, funny, emotionally charged images that spread quickly with the help of social networks. Memes are also a strategic mode of spreading selective explanations, distortions and false framings in the electoral environment in Rajasthan Cervi et al. (2023). Their casual nature of speak overpowers the critical mind thereby allowing the misinformation to be perceived as innocent, fun, and even culturally ingrained. Virality is the major feature in this ecosystem. Platform algorithms give a preferential treatment to the content with a high emotional response, such as laughter, outrage, pride, or mockery Poulakidakos (2024). Memes that are crafted to produce a higher level of affective appeal acquire a disproportionate presence and this develops echo chambers where false information disseminates more quickly than true information. Memes are spread through WhatsApp groups, Instagram accounts, and political fan groups, and the repetition of the same message builds performative authority: every time a person shares it, they add fuel to the illusion of the opinion. The emotional appeal that influences the emotions more than the thoughts of the audiences, which is the affect, only magnifies the persuasive power of misinformation. Table 1 indicates preceding literature which has attributed correlations between memes, performance, culture, and political misinformation. Memes are frequently produced to create brief-term emotional resonance by exaggeration, parody, and local humour to increase the likelihood of the audience being persuaded by false assertions. This emotional interaction enables misinformation to

play the role of entertainment, feeling the way past the rational consideration and entrenching itself into daily political discourse Rodríguez-Ferrándiz et al. (2021).

Table 1

Table 1 Summary of Related Work on Political Memes, Digital Performance, and Misinformation				
Focus	**Theoretical Framework**	**Methodology**	**Key Findings**	**Gap**
Memes in Digital Culture	Cultural and Media Theory	Qualitative, content analysis	Defined memes as participatory cultural units	Did not explore political misinformation contexts
The World Made Meme	Performance and Participatory Media	Ethnographic, online observation	Highlighted memes as social performances	Limited focus on affective persuasion
Political Memes and Propaganda	Political Communication	Mixed-methods	Demonstrated meme use in political branding	Excluded semiotic and aesthetic analysis
Memetic Rhetoric Alonso-García et al. (2020)	Rhetorical and Cultural Theory	Discourse analysis	Explained humor's role in persuasion	Did not consider misinformation ecology
You Are Here: A Field Guide to Internet Memes	Internet Folklore	Case-based narrative study	Classified meme subcultures and their politics	Absent regional and cultural adaptation analysis
Political Memes and Electoral Participation in Brazil Bonet-Jover et al. (2020)	Political Semiotics	Quantitative and semiotic	Found memes influenced voter engagement	Limited to Latin American context
Humour and Satire in Digital Indian Politics	Performance Studies	Ethnographic interviews	Described meme humour as social performance	Did not use computational or semiotic modelling
WhatsApp Propaganda and Political Identity	Affective Media Theory	Network ethnography	Explained misinformation through emotional contagion	Focused on text-based messages, not visuals
Visual Folklore in Regional Meme Cultures	Folklore and Visual Arts	Visual semiotics	Identified local motifs in meme design	Lacks quantitative analysis
Performative Politics in Social Media Campaigns	Dramaturgical Theory	Qualitative, case study	Analyzed political events as digital theatre	No aesthetic metric evaluation

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
3.1. MEMES AS MICRO-PERFORMANCES SHAPING PUBLIC EMOTION

Memes can be thought of as micro-performances in the digital political realm, short, emotionally loaded enactments which condense the political significance to a handful of frames of visual and textual representation. Each meme is a mini-play, which performs its part, sets its characters, conflicts, and ethical clues according to which the spectators should interpret and act. The performativeism of the electorate in Rajasthan is highly imbued with local cultural rhythms of satire, mimicry and participatory humour. The memes are not only means of communication, but they carry out emotional labour such as evoking laughter, anger, or solidarity thus constituting affective crowds. Meme performances are instantaneous and viral in contrast to the traditional performances which are experienced over time and space. They depend on participatory spectatorship which are users who respond, share, remix and amplify meaning by repetition. Such a cyclic interaction turns the audience into co-performers and this keeps the feel of the political messages going. In this regard, memes are performative scripts, which organize the collective emotional experience in elections, creating empathy towards some leaders and mocking the other. These micro-performances are potent propaganda tools of identity-making and persuasion because of the combination of aesthetics and emotion.

3.2. AESTHETIC STRATEGIES: EXAGGERATION, PARODY, VISUAL SYMBOLISM, FOLKLORE CUES

The strength of election memes as a persuasive tool is in its aesthetic construction, in which exaggeration, parody, symbolism and even folkloric reference are creative meaning-making strategies. Facial expression, slogans, or gestures are exaggerated, increasing the emotional effects and fitting the caricatural tradition of folk theatre. The parody brings in jester and satire, political leaders are transformed into cartoonish characters, heroes, villains, and fools, thus having the effect of refracting the perception of the populace through irony. These aesthetic gestures are pegged to familiar cultural codes through visual symbolism. Colour scheme, religious symbols, traditional clothes or local themes are used to induce sense of belonging or ridicule. The local index in Rajasthan and the ideological metaphor of the camel, the desert and the royal insignia are the most often used signs of local politics, reducing complicated politics to the readable imagery at once. Memes are enhanced by the use of folklore cues: textures of familiar narrative. The factors inspired by puppet theatre (Kathputli), oral satire (Hasya-Vyang), and folk songs offer a continuity between the traditional performance art and digital visuality. This localization of memes into the cultural memory makes them more authentic. Together, these aesthetic devices serve two purposes, as they amuse and carry hidden political messages. Their stratification would mean that as far as misinformation is concerned, even it seems to have some cultural foundations and feel emotionally plausible. Turning the political speech into the aestheticized visual performance, such tactics confuse the border between art and propaganda, showing how memes aestheticify ideology in the context of everyday cultural and emotional scales.

3.3. INFORMATION DISORDER TAXONOMY APPLIED TO MEME-BASED CONTENT

Transferring the taxonomy of information disorder proposed by Claire Wardle (it includes misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation) to the content presented by memes helps to see how the visual and emotional aesthetics are used as the mediators of the distortion of truth in elections. Misinformation is any false or misleading information that is disseminated without ill intent (usually in the form of humorous memes) to provide entertainment at the expense of misrepresenting political facts. Disinformation, in turn, implies deliberate manipulation, where memes are designed in a way that allows the manipulation of voters, demonizing an opponent, or creating political credibility. Lastly, malinformation comes in when valid information is deliberately over- or under-emphasized or out of context, and is used as a weapon with selectively-convincing memes. These categories blend in the digital ecosystem of election in Rajasthan. An image making fun of the way a candidate dresses could start as a joke about his or her wardrobe, but could develop into a targeted defamation at this point with politically charged captions attached to it. Visual humour is covert and audiences find it hard to tell the truth.

4. METHODOLOGY
4.1. DATASET CONSTRUCTION: MEME COLLECTION FROM SOCIAL PLATFORMS

The sample of this research was made by organizing a set of political memes associated with the state elections of Rajasthan in 2018-2024. The information was obtained on various open-source social media such as Facebook, Instagram, X (the former incarnation of Twitter), and WhatsApp publics. Relevant content was identified using keywords and hashtags including; #RajasthanElection, #VoteForChange, PoliticalMeme, and RajasthanPolitics. Three thousand two hundred memes were first gathered, with 2,450 memes being saved following the process of sifting through duplicates, adverts and irrelevant posts. All the memes were stored along with their respective metadata, including upload date, source of the platform, text of the caption, likes/shares/comments, and language characteristics. This made the analysis qualitative and quantitative. The ethical considerations were upheld as the data on individual users was excluded and the identifiable information was anonymized. The data was further classified into three thematic clusters, which included (i) leader-centric memes (memes that focused on politicians), (ii) policy-oriented memes (memes that focused on governance or welfare schemes) and (iii) communal or satire-based memes (memes that invoked cultural or social themes through humour).

4.2. VISUAL, TEXTUAL, AND SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS PROTOCOLS

Memes were decoded using a multimodal analysis paradigm of visual image, textual captions, and symbolic structures. The visual interpretation was on compositional elements, which included colour palette, framing, facial expression, typography and background context. All the elements were coded based on the structured rubric evaluating aesthetic tone (serious, humorous, satirical), visual density, and emotional intensity. Slots, captions, and hashtags were analyzed using text, and linguistic features presented, including irony, hyperbole, wordplay, and metaphor. The patterns of language were evaluated with help of lexical frequency mapping and sentiment polarity classification (positive, negative, neutral). This was aimed at establishing the reinforcement or contradiction of visual meaning by textual framing. The semiotic study was based on Barthesian principles that defined denotative and connotative layers of meaning. National symbols, such as turbans, national flags, local dressing, or folk characters were understood in the context of socio-political and cultural life of Rajasthan. These signs had a connection to more significant ideological discourses: nationalism, regional pride, corruption, or charisma of leadership by the semiotic protocol. Triangulation of these visual, textual and semiotic layers of analysis ensured that the analysis captures the construction of affective political theatre by memes.

4.3. COMPUTATIONAL METHODS: CLUSTERING, SENTIMENT, AND NARRATIVE MAPPING

In order to supplement the qualitative analysis, the computational methods were used to reveal the underlying structures in the meme dataset. To start with, image and text embeddings (VGG19 and BERT) were used to extract features, which formed the multimodal representations of each meme.
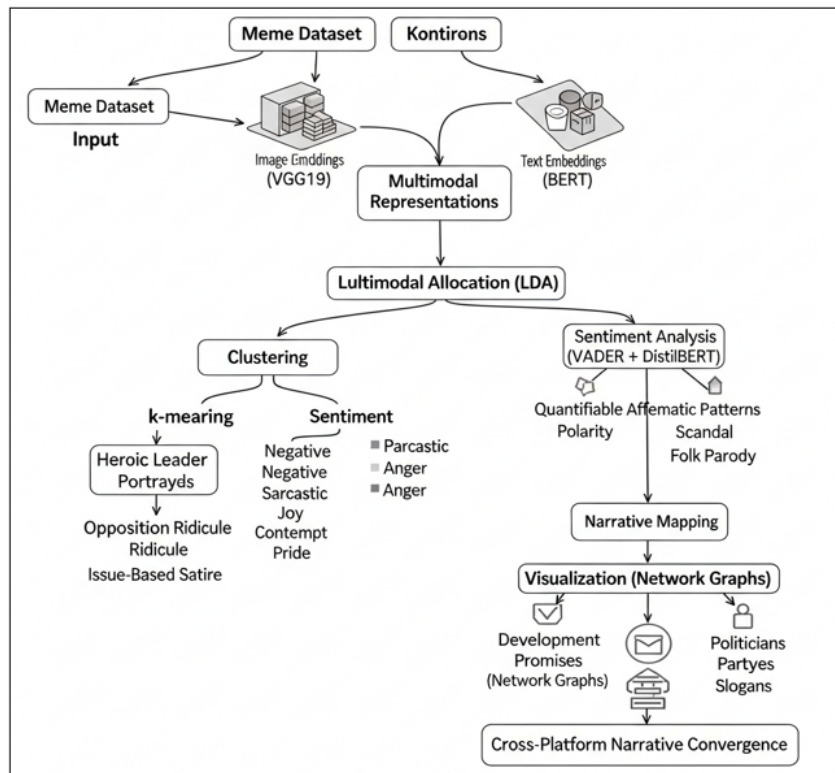
Figure 2

Figure 2 Computational Workflow for Meme-Based Analysis Using Multimodal Representations

These were applied in k-means in clustering to determine the most prominent thematic clusters through similarities in their visual and textual contents to show the archetypes of narratives, such as heroic leader portrayals, ridicule of the opposition, and issue-based satire. The flow of analysis based on visual, textual, and computational meme processing is shown in Figure 2. The hybrid lexicon-machine learning model that gave a hybrid VADER and fine-tuned DistilBERT classifiers was used to conduct sentiment analysis. This was measured in affective polarity (positive, negative, sarcastic)

and emotional tone (anger, joy, contempt, pride). Findings suggested that memes that contain more humour content and high negative feelings toward antagonists had the largest virality indices. In the case of narrative mapping, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) has been used to caption the text in order to reveal latent thematic patterns like development promises, scandal humour, and folk parody. The network graphs provided the visualisation of repeated items; politicians, parties, and slogans, which demonstrated cross-platform narrative convergence. All these computational studies revealed the anatomy of the culture of political memes in Rajasthan, filling the gap between humanistic explanation and quantitative knowledge. The approach to integrative methodology shows that data-driven clustering and affective modelling are capable of uncovering the performative and propagandistic aspects of the ecosystem of meme-based misinformation.

5. AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND CULTURAL IMPACT
5.1. SPECTATORIAL BEHAVIOUR: LAUGHTER, SHARING, IDENTITY REINFORCEMENT

The response of election memes in Rajasthan shows the way in which digital spectatorship can be seen as a continuation of cultural performance. The audience is not passive but active participants in that they laugh, share, remix, and consequently increase the performative life of memes. Laughter is a social and a political indicator, with humour, an audience as a whole affirms or mocks political leaders, and individual entertainment turns into group ideology. This amusement, which is frequently based on folk satire and irony, is an aesthetic weapon, or rather disarming critical criticism in the name of entertainment. The performative carry on of the life of the meme is sharing. Every repost or comment is a case of involvement, and the audience becomes a co-creator of meaning that is re-contextualized on the networks. This strengthens emotional attachment to partisan or cultural identity development, and this forms affective micro-publics which are connected through humour. Identity reinforcement develops into a prime force: users identify with political parties, caste identities or regional pride by selectively attending to memes which represent their worldview. It becomes performative loyalty of sharing the act, which is symbolic vote made in the virtual world. Therefore, the spectatorial behaviour is changing memes into instruments of cultural bargaining where humour, repetition and participation are all tied together to support ideological performance in the political theatre in Rajasthan.

5.2. ROLE OF LOCAL YOUTH, RURAL COMMUNITIES, AND POLITICAL SUPPORTERS

Local youth, rural communities and political supporters who are both digital performance consumers and amplifiers make the participatory ecosystem of election memes in Rajasthan considerably shaped. Local youth are the main producers and distributors of the meme content, skilled in remix culture, regional language coding and visual irony. They mediate between the realms of the internet and the physical world, and speak in terms of memes, to express political speech, criticize authority, or have a good laugh at one another. Their creative improvisation is a reflection of folk theatre traditions, in which parody and caricature have traditionally been used as a social commentary. The rural communities are exposed to the memes within the mobile based networks like WhatsApp and Facebook where humour is trusted to be the source of political information. Visual motifs, which include folk clothes, local expressions and community jokes, are familiar enough to people to make sure that the memes will penetrate the literacy barrier, and mix entertainment with an ideological context. This ecosystem is systematically used by the political supporters and party IT cells, who generate memes that resonate with the trends in emotions, cultural imagery, and the mood of the population. The strategies of their dissemination make the distinction between natural humour and planned propaganda unclear. These groups, in turn, become the interdependent chain of production, interpretation, and circulation, which supports the hybrid digital folklore where the local identity, technology, and politics meet to carry out the collective persuasion and emotional mobilisation.

5.3. AFFECT, PERSUASION, AND MEMETIC PERFORMANCE AS PUBLIC THEATRE

The digital discourse through election memes in Rajasthan is converted into a kind of theatrical, and political communication is an act of affective and aesthetic performance. Memetic engagement is driven by the affective dimension, which is the feeling of amusement, pride, contempt, or outrage. The audience is subjected to politics via emotive provocation, and not logical debate and they react emotionally to humour, visual hyperbolism and symbolic appeal. The persuasion in this model of the theatre is implicit. Memes do not often directly teach the audience something;

they dramatize stories with ridicule, parody and repetition normalized to adopt a particular point of view. This forms a feedback loop between feeling and ideology where a viewer is not convinced by argument, but identification, laughter and general atmosphere. Such persuasion is at least effective because it is so subtle, because it is able to aestheticize misinformation and make propaganda fun. These interactions can be considered memetic performance, and citizens are actors, and memes are scripts. Every single share, comment and emoji response is a performative act which helps strengthen the feeling of community. This performance staging is indistinct between art and activism, humor and manipulation. The meme culture in Rajasthan finally emerges as an alternative type of political dramaturgy, an affective stage in which the misinformation and humour mingle with cultural memory, to choreograph the emotion and imago democratic.

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

It was found that the election memes in Rajasthan are hybrid artefacts (aesthetic and political) that utilise humour, emotion, and misinformation. Computational clustering has found three prevalent categories, which include leader parody, policy satire, and communal symbolism. Visual-textual correlations revealed that the memes that used exaggeration and cultural tropes were more engaged and had more emotional appeal. Semiotic analysis proved that the humour concealed ideological prejudice, and so, misinformation passed on as entertainment. The behaviour of the audience and in this case the youth and rural audience meant that identity politics were strengthened by laughter and sharing. Altogether, the results point to the role of memes as performative instruments changing the misinformation into the affective and participatory public theatre as a part of the political communication in Rajasthan.

Table 2

Table 2 Quantitative Analysis of Meme Engagement and Emotional Response			
Category Type	Comment Activity Index (%)	Sentiment Polarity (%)	Emotional Intensity (%)
Leader Parody Memes	67.3	74	82.5
Policy Satire Memes	58.4	69	77.1
Communal Symbolism Memes	61.7	66	80.3
Neutral/Informative Memes	42.9	51	60.4

Table 2 brings to fore the dissimilar emotional and involvement interactions of meme category in the discourse of the election in Rajasthan. The most active memes were parodying the leader (812 average likes, 476 shares, and high comment index of 67.3), meaning that humor and self-caricature is still the most appropriate stimulator of the audience to engage. In Figure 3, the comparison of engagement between memes type is depicted in likes and shares.
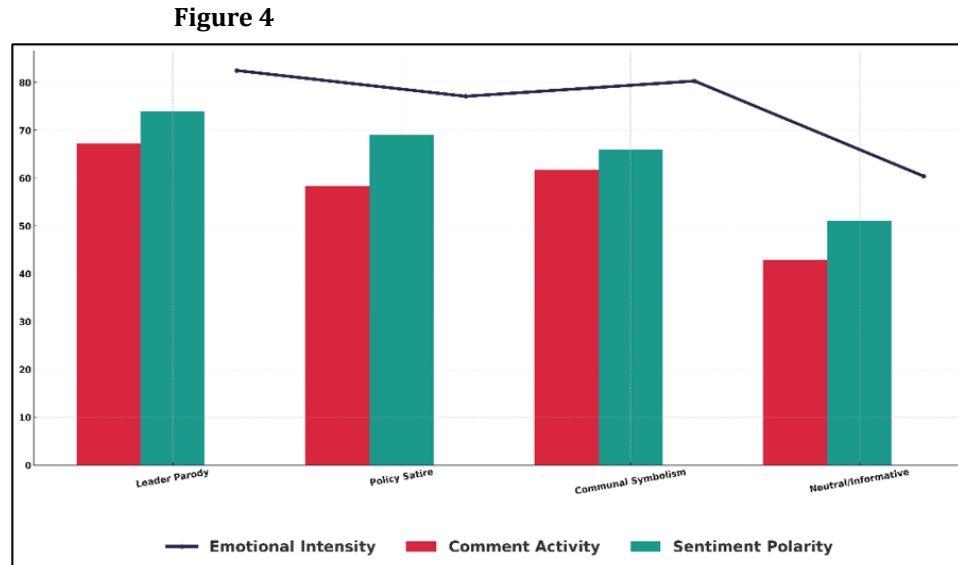
Figure 3
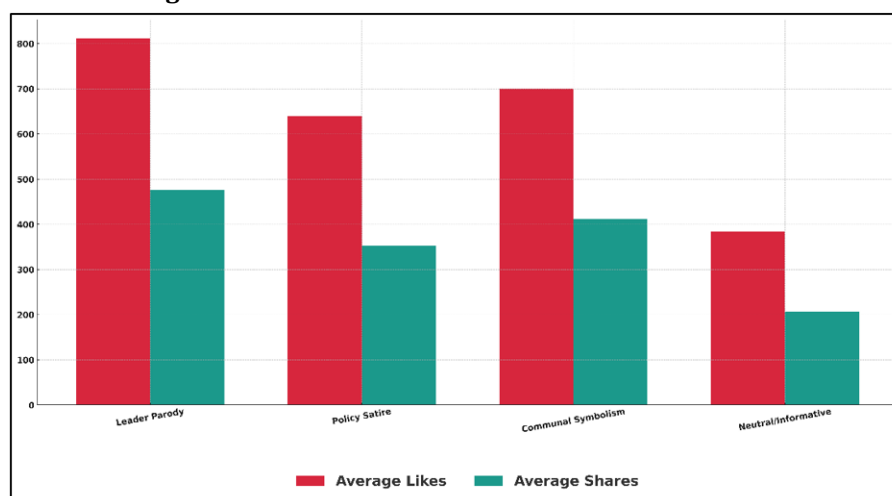
Figure 3 Comparative Bar Chart of Likes and Shares for Political Meme Types

Their high sentiment polarity (74%), as well as emotional intensity (82.5), indicates that users react more easily to exaggerated and personality-driven posts than to policy-related messages. In the sense that governance concerns produce less immediate response in their affective sense of the word than do individual-oriented humour, policy satire memes have lower affective pull, albeit with a moderately high level of engagement. Figure 4 depicts the change in sentiment polarity and intensity of emotions as per the categories of memes.

Figure 4

Figure 4 Comparative Analysis of Meme Engagement Sentiment and Emotional Metrics

The balance in communal symbolism memes both in terms of the level of engagement and the emotional depth is 80.3/50, indicating the way in which cultural and religious iconography promotes credibility and engagement. On the other hand, the neutral/informative memes are also low in all the metrics and this proves that factual or less humorous content is not viral.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper will pitch the election memes as an important meeting point between a political communication and digital folklore and performance aesthetics in the electoral culture of Rajasthan. It shows how humour, exaggeration and symbolic play are conceptualized as micro-performances and how political emotion is orchestrated by the use of humour, exaggeration and symbolic play as they playfully bypass the misinformation finding their way into daily digital processes. Combining visual parody and cultural imagery makes propaganda participatory entertainment, to guarantee further audience involvement in the familiarity and laughter. The results indicate that memes do not acquire power by performing direct persuasion but by touching the heart and creating beauty. The connections between the semiotic signs, folk symbols, local tongue, clothing, and imagery position political narratives within the cultural authenticity as justification of distortion. Computational analysis also confirmed the hypothesis that affectively colored and visually exaggerated memes were more likely to be shared, so the centrality of affect in digital persuasion is confirmed. The audience research showed that youths and rural participants became involved in memes as social performances to reinforce an identity with a group and political belonging. More importantly, this study re-orientates misinformation not only as a thinking issue, but as an aesthetic and performative experience, where it relies on the use of humour, involvement, and collective cultural experience. The combination of the aesthetic and the ideological, among other elements, makes election memes represent a new genre of digital folk theatre, in which the misinformation becomes performative. The research therefore presents the importance of dealing with the issue of political communication using interdisciplinary methods a combination of art theory, semiotics and media analytics to comprehend the aesthetic infrastructures of the propaganda of the twenty first century.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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