# Political Memes and Affective Polarization: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Pakistani Political Memes

**Author:**
Maria Khan

## Abstract
Political memes play an integral role in shaping online political discourses by communicating political identities, affiliations and views with the opportunity for the audiences to engage in such discourses. However, some of the discourses in the memes are intendant to demonize, criticize, differentiate, attack, and or negatively evaluate certain political parties and politicians. Therefore, this article adopts a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to study the discourses of some of the Pakistani political memes on Twitter in relation to affective polarization. That is, the aim of this study is to examine the presence of affective polarization in the discourses of political memes to know whether and how does political memes catalyze affective polarization. This analysis reveals that, the political memes catalyze affective polarization through its discourses dominated by (de)legitimization, labelling, us versus them differentiation, dehumanization, and trivialization.

## 1. Introduction
Social media occupies a distinct place in modern day's political communication by offering different networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other microblogging services which have enabled the public to participate in online political discourses. On these networks though many means are used for online political engagements but the most prominent emerged among them is political memes. Political internet memes play an integral role in shaping online political discourses, that's why its place is now cemented in every major online aspect of the political discourses (Esteves, 2018).

Political memes are considered a political tool that sometimes unclear a political issue or indicates certain political affiliations, ideologies and identities (Lin, 2021). Previous literature suggests that political memes carry particular political propagandas and are popular means of activating online political engagement (Lin, 2021) but if watch closely they also raises concerns about its role in affective polarization because political memes are not the mere conduit of political information rather it enable the users and audiences to commit to a particular political action or ideology with regard to a political concerns by means of sharing, liking and comments (Shahin, 2022) and this is the reason Penny (2019) suggests that memes are manipulative  political tools that can immediately pit people against each other because in political memes some of the discourses are intendant to demean, discredit, attack, mock, differentiate, and negatively evaluate certain political figures or parties (Lin, 2021) by shaping a group identity. Similarly, affective polarization emerges with hostile, demeaning, dislike, and aggressive feelings towards political opponents based on group identities that triggers political intolerance towards the political opponents (Schmid et al., 2022). Therefore, we assume if political memes potentially shapes a collective political identity of a group with a demeaning, hostile, and negative discourses then it may possibly can catalyzes affective polarization.

Hence, foregrounded by the above, it is engrossing to analyze political memes in relation to affective polarization using a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. In this particular study we are focused on the manner in which political memes are employed for communicating various political views, beliefs and ideological stances regarding different political parties, figures and events in which affectivity might have been ascribed. Therefore, this study tentatively raises a research question:

**RQ: Whether and how does political memes catalyze affective polarization?**

## 2. Literature Review

This section briefly discusses the existing concept of the memes and the studies done on political memes and affective polarization.

### 2.1. Conceptualization of Memes

The word "meme" derived from the Greek word "Mimeme", first came in use in 1976 in Dawkins's book titled *The Selfish Gene*. The term meme in his context was used in the sense that they are a unit of culture which through "imitations passes from individuals to individuals" (p. 206). Similarly, Shifman (2013, p.5) defines the internet memes as "units of popular culture which are transmitted, imitated and circulated by the social media users, leading to a shared culture experiences".

Foregrounded by the above, there are two competing definitions of memes, first, a traditional definition that looks at the memes as a cultural elements (Dawkins, 1976), and second, a popular definition which consider memes as an internet artifacts (as an image, videos, piece of text or image Marcos etc.) generated by the online users (Chandler, 2013) typically in humorous nature.

### 2.2. Political Memes

Studies on political memes initially were concerned with what memes actually mean (McCloud, 1994). According to McCloud (1994) memes are amplification by simplification, in simple words, memes have the potential to condense a complex political facts into a simple, powerful and effective form, being capable of attracting huge attention (Rastogi & Kashyap, 2019). Similarly, few studies also examined the characteristic and content of the political memes (Rastogi & Kshyap, 2019; Shifman, 2013). It is now commonly held notion that political memes are the main source of political participation helping the people to express their views and opinions on various political events and issues which otherwise would have been impossible through traditional media (Shifman, 2013). As a result of extensive growth and role of political memes, growing body of scholarship identifies not only the potential of political memes in shaping the political outcomes but its influence on the users too (Mrawick & Lewis, 2017). Milner (2012 & 2013) and Shifman (2014) suggest memes are user-generated content, being frequently used in online political communication for supporting and validating the feelings, beliefs, views and opinions of the users on important political issues/matters. Similarly, Decker-Maurer (2012) claims that through memes people built a political identity like they do through bumper stickers and campaign signs. That being said, Huntington (2017, p. 179) through visual rhetoric study of political memes established that "memes decrease positive affect because political memes are the cause of aversion among those who view them". These feelings of aversion among the viewers have been said to be triggered by the political memes based on the de-legitimization identified by Ross and River (2017).

### 2.3. Affective Polarization

Affective polarization unlike ideological polarization, emerges due to hostility, disdain and negative evaluation of the political out-group (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018) resulting from extreme negative stereotyping and discrimination (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Mason, 2018). This very concept of affective polarization is assume to be rooted on an opinion-based in-group identity that are focused on three further concepts; identification with the in-groups, distinction from the out-group that consequently creates animosity and aversion against them, and the bias evaluation in decision making and world's perception (Hobolt et al., 2021).

Affective polarization motivates one to negatively evaluate out-party such as, imputing negative traits to political opponents (Garrett, et al., 2014), stereotyping opponent political candidates race, (Valentino et al., 2004), gender (McDermott, 1997) etc. or conversely, the decreases evolution of political opponents stem affective polarization (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). In social media discourses, few studies also contend that criticizing and demeaning the political actors, political parties and out-group partisans can cause affective and social polarization (Suhay et al., 2015). Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter etc. which have enabled the users to put their opinions and views on various political events/issues across, are now being considered a major contributors in the partisan polarization, criticism of political opponents and uncivil discourses (Anderson et al., 2014; Levendusky, 2013) that's why the political conversation

taking place particularly online are consider mostly negative and dominated by the criticism of political adversaries sometimes even with demeaning discourses. which consequently delegitimizes various politicians (Mutz, 2007).

Like other online discourses, political memes a social media tool contended as an ideological tools also intensifies the political division (Burroughs, 2020) as memes contribute no new political ideologies or behaviors, instead reinforces existing stereotypes, ideologies, expressions and attacks (Mielczarek, 2018). Therefore, it becomes important to study this online political tool to know what political discourses are dominated in them, how political identities are communicated and how these discourses and identities can influence or play a role in affective polarization.

### 2.4. Theoretical Framework

This present study is intended to utilize Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). It is a valuable framework since memes are multimodal braiding text with image therefore, it would enable us to understand how language and other types of semiotics signs (images) are employed by the memes in our study's sample. This framework will help us to delve deeply to know how events, political actors and political parties are represented and contextualized or (re)contextualized textually and visually that might favor and or sustain certain dominant political powers, identities and ideologies which can be central to affective polarization.

### 3. Methodology

This study uses qualitative approach that rest on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA).

### 3.1. Study Design

Evaluation of digital media has increased the role and importance of visuals in message dissemination, therefore, it has become a need of this study also to analyze both verbal and visuals components of the selected political memes. In MCDA, CDA is concerned with the relationship of what is communicated, the social realities associated with it and the analysis of discourses to identify the identities, actions, facts and inevitable events or conditions that in text are either concealed, abstracted or highlighted that have certain ideologies and political consequences (Fairclough, 2003) Whereas, MDA gives an account of how images and visuals carry ideologies, identities and actions. Therefore, the selected sample of this study examines both textually and visually. For textual analysis Fairclough (2003, p. 3) concept is barrowed to study word connotation, lexical choices, ideational function, identities, relations, metaphors, intertextualities and discourse practices employed in the memes' text. And for visual analysis , Machin (2007) MDA approach is used to examine: Particippnats, Setting, Poses, and Objects.

### 3.2. Data selection

For sampling porpuses, few main political themes such as "completion of two years of PTI government", "PDM movement", "Senate election" , and "Vote of confidence called by PM Imran khan" from July 2020 to April 2021 were chosen to draw the required sample from Twitter via specified hashtags related to the above themes. Once the memes were retrieved from Twitter our date gave us a cumulative of 34 memes. We further sorted the sample on the basis of likes, and retweets in each hashtags in order to avoid any bias and reduced it to 16. Since, it is impossible for us to showcase all of those 16 memes here in this article, therefore, we have narrowed our sample further to 7 memes which we believe appropriately and clearly serve this study purpose.

### 4. Analysis

The analysis is categorized into two parts, first, each single meme is analyzed through CDA lens where textual and discourse analysis is performed and secondly, the MDA analysis is taken into consideration in which the iconographic study of every single meme is carried out.

4.1. Analysis of figure 1

آپ کی دعاؤں سے آپریشن رد و بدل کامیاب رہا۔

#2YearsOfDisaster
Translate Tweet



This .آپکی دعاؤں سے آپریشن رد و بدل کامیاب رہا. :The text written above and superimposed on the image reads Urdu phrase can be translated as, your prayers made the operation dismissal and alteration a success. The lexical units such "آپریشن رد و بدل"have negative connotation, generally these words are used in the sense of cheating or fraud but as these lexis are commutative of two words "رد" and "بدل" which means dismiss and alter/change, hence, together it generally refers to a situation where there is an act of a fraud. Therefore, we can say the words suggest some fraud or cheating has been done. The metaphor operation denotes a military venture but connotatively the metaphor is perpetuating a negative idea about the political regime change in Pakistan, that is, the lexical selection connotes the ideology that the political change in the country has been brought under a fraud or cheating that involves some non-democratic forces. Besides this, the lexical unit آپکی دعاؤں سے/with your prayers, reflects the personality of General Zia-ul-Haq because he would use it often during his speeches and addresses to the public. Hence, we can say the text personifies Imran Khan as General Zia-ul-Haq.

The discourse entails in the text points to the involvement of establishment in the election of Imran Khan's government. In Pakistani politics the role of establishment is considered key. Soon after the 2018 general elections in the country, the opposition parties accused establishment for rigging the election by ultimately establishing a narrative against Imran Khan as being a selected PM. The lexical units also foregrounds the same ideology against Imran Khan by reinforcing the narrative that the election was a selection, engineered by the establishment in his favor. Moreover, using the phrase reflective of General Zia-ul-Haq personality, the text not only indicates the role of establishment but also considers Imran Khan as undemocratic prime minister. Hence, reinforcing the existing ideology of the opposition's parties, the text no doubt (de)legitimizes the credential of Imran Khan as being PM of the country by declaring his authority and position as illegitimate and a product of dictatorship.

While analyzing iconographic elements of the meme we can see the image is without any background, however, the image is playing on the text for the ideology it carries. Here the concept of labeling or stigmatization has been used to delegitimize him. In the above image Imran Khan can be seen depicted as General Zia-ul-Haq (former army chief and President of Pakistan) rendering him a product of dictators. This labeling not only delegitimizing the authority of Khan but it also reflects his style of leadership, representing him as unconventional, authoritarian and populist. His facial stern and forceful expressions are making it obvious that his power is (un)lawful and undemocratic. Therefore, with the support of the text, the image also attempts to delegitimize Imran Khan's position, power and authority.

4.2. Analysis of figure 2



The text above the meme reads: this man is without a question is the most shameless person in the entire universe. In the text the lexical choices such as man, shameless, entire universe are playing a major role in the ideology put forward by the meme creator. The connotation of man is quite derogatory as Imran Khan was PM of the country and instead of using his name or his position as a PM, a colloquial term "man" is used, which suggests a negative hostile attitude, anger and disrespect of the meme creator. The descriptive adjective 'shameless' is a negative lexis that describes an act unwanted or done without worrying about the right and wrong. Connotatively it is describing Imran khan as one who lacks dignity, grace and sensibility.

With regard to the discourse, the above textual components depending on the superimposed text of the meme evidently reveal the creator's ideological stance on Imran Khan's authority as a PM. The parochial lexical choice such as man and shameless have been used as a smirch on the reputation of Imran Khan as a PM in order to delegitimize his character through moral vilification.

Whereas, the text superimposed below the meme states:

قائد ملت نے فرمایا! کام کام بس کام،

قائد قلت نے فرمایا! مانگ مانگ بس مانگ

The text can be translated as father of nation said! Work, work and work

Father of deficit said! Beg, beg and beg.

The lexical patterns are relying on intertextuality through a direct quote from the father of the nation, Quaid Azam's 'work, work and work'. This phrase is not just the saying of Quaid but is considered as a national slogan which is taught in the educational institutions and is reinforced through various mass media channels as a guiding principle for the whole nation to follow. However, in the text, it is used as a reference in explaining the political approach and policies of Imran khan (then PM). Also a neologism has been introduced in the text, such as قائد قلت father of deficit. Neologism refers to a new word or expression. In this memes, the neologism helps to transcend from an important and positive tone to a mocking one (Pidkuĭmukha & Kiss, 2020).

The discourse of the above text through moral evaluation comparison is delegitimizing Imran Khan in relation to Quaid-e-Azam (Father of the Nation). Comparison sometimes creates a great sense of menace

helping in attributing a blame easily to the one who is compared (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Similarly in the above instance, the image of Imran Khan is juxtaposed with Quaid-e-Azam through an alteration of a quote. The alteration suggests that Imran Khan has carried out an action contrary to what a leader needs to. Hence, through moral evaluative technique the alteration and neologism have been employed in the text to delegitimize Imran Khan (then the PM) depicting him as incapable of leading the nation.

From the iconographic elements of the meme clearly lacks a distinguishable background. Such image is therefore, used symbolically to support the text of the meme. However, still it is important to study the comparison drawn between the two participants of the image. The importance, power and influence of Quaid-e- Azam is depicted through a slightly high head position. Imran Khan and Quaid are separated by empty space that indicates the distance between the two (Machin, 2007). The distance indicates the difference of political and ideological approach between the two political figures. Similarly, if we see, the gazes of Quaid are directed straight to the audience suggesting he is engaged with the audience (Machin, 2007) such gazes are considered positive as they reflect trust, confidence and honesty. Although the gazes of Imran khan are also directed to the audience, yet his rigid face depicts his lack of confidence in honesty and hard work. In short, the image is complementing the text's discourse.

4.3. Analysis of figure 3



The text above the meme reads: Niazi leading the looters and selectors are guarding them. The lexical units in the above text such as the noun Niazi is cast name referring to Imran khan. The connotation of this particular noun is interestingly significant as it is used in the context of a disrespect to deride Imran Khan's position. The action verb 'leading' suggests a misuse of power. Whereas, the noun Looters is connoting Imran Khan's cabinet & party members and some of his allies, and the noun selectors are representing the military establishment of Pakistan who were accused by the opposition for bringing Mr. Khan into power.

On the other hand, the text superimposed on the image states: though captain himself is not a thief but he is patronizing the other thieves by filling their sacks. This text indicates that though captain (Imran Khan) is denying being a thief but he is at a position that allows him to patronize his members and allies in plundering the nation's money. This perceived view of the meme creator is vilifying Imran khan for being involved in an immoral and illegal act of paving a way to his allies, party and cabinet members for corruption.

The discourse suggests Imran Khan has been derogated and vilified with his surname Niazi reminding the public that Imran Khan hails from the same tribe as General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi who had surrendered to India in the war of 1971 because of which the country suffered humiliation, shame and disgrace. That's why, the name Niazi is used by his political adversaries as a mockery. Similarly, in the text the attribution is adding a tone of disrespect and condemnation for the sake of (de)legitimization. The

lexical pattern through insulting nomination (labels) such as Naizi, looters and selectors are attacking Imran khan for being dishonest to the people as there is an explicit insinuation to the irrationality in the claims of Imran Khan about no corruption charges against him and his government. The lexical units, therefore, employs theoretical rationalization to delegitimize Imran Khan as being untruthful and dishonest. Theoretical rationalization points to the untrue nature of the actions (Ross & River, 2017). Moreover, by employing the labels such as Naizi, looters, and selectors, the meme's creator tries focusing on the othering of the political opponent in order to explicitly turn the public opinion against them.

The iconographic elements help in analyzing the background of the image depicting a national treasury full of money, surrounded by Imran khan, his members and allies. Imran Khan can be seen filling his members' sacks with the money from the national treasury. This action is pointing to their corruption and plundering of the taxpayers' money. The depiction is negatively portraying Imran Khan and his government members. The most interesting point in the image to note is the size of the participants, the much bigger size of Imran khan is connoting the power of his position and influence which is enabling him to lead the corruption. The image of Imran Khan corresponds to the textual content that foregrounds Imran khan as the leading figure in the corruption of his government.

The image congruent to the text, delegitimizes Imran Khan by negatively presenting him as a leader who didn't bring anything good to the country rather acts without good reasoning and abusing his position for corruption. The image and the text, therefore, utilizes a theoretical rationalization as a delegitimizing strategy to stress on Imran Khan's dishonesty, untrustworthiness and irrationalities.

4.4. Analysis of figure 4



The text written on the image reads: speaking of tragic endings. The lexis 'tragedy' denotes a disastrous or sorrowful event. Though ending doesn't have a negative connotation itself but in this particular meme, it is connoting to breaking off. Hence tragic ending refers to the end of the PDM movement.

The discourse in textual components of the meme have been built on the image. Hence, reinforcing the image and keeping the internal conflict between two major parties of PDM (PML-N and PPP) on the matter of resignation from National Assembly and provincial Assemblies (in order to pressurize the government a head of Senate elections PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari and his party refused to agree on resignation which created a rift among the member parties of PDM), the meme creator tries to establish a contrast between present and future in overt manners. In other words, the text presupposes a possible imagined undesirable future of the PDM pertinent to their present situation invoking Mythopoesis.

As far as the iconographic analysis of the meme is concerned we can see two images, the image to the left is from Titanic move and to the right is from PDM's rally. The Titanic's image serves as a metaphor helping the creator to put forth the desired ideology. Although both images have participants but at the right side Maryum Nawaz (PML-N leader) and Maulana Fazal-UR-Rahman (JUIF Leader) standing out in the foreground. Maryum Nawaz can be seen leaning on to Maulana's shoulder. This posture negatively portrays her as subjugate and obedient to Maulana. Or in other words, we can say Maryum Nawaz is looking for Maluana's help and support. Moving forward, looking at the Titanic image the male is shown

supportive to the female but on the other hand the support is lacking. Hence, the pose suggests that even though the Titanic couple were supportive to each other yet they couldn't save their ship, how PDM can survive with no unity and support. Likewise, Maulana and Maryum Nawaz are looking in different directions means they have different objectives and this is one indication why this movement will fail because both are going in different directions. This means, the image complementing the text suggests there are disagreements among the parties and these disagreement will eventually end the movement.

Hence reinforcing the text, the image utilizes the Mythopoesis strategy to delegitimize PDM movement through a negative and gloomy future projection. Mythopoesis refers to a possible future prediction that may or may not be desirable (Ross & Rivers, 2017).

4.5. Analysis of figure 5

we should unite against corrupt
mafia

ایک_نیازی_سب_پہ_بھاری#



Above the image is text which reads: we should unite against corrupt mafia. The lexical choices, for instance, we, should, corrupt, and mafia suggests very interesting connotations such as the concept of We is slippery (Fairclough, 1993) because it has been used for a particular party (PTI) and its supporters. A modal verb 'should' is used to communicate some urgency or obligation. In this particular text, should is referring to an obligation. The adjective 'corrupt' negatively explains and presents the opposition parties as worse and wicked who have brought the country down with their dishonest behavior, whereas, Mafia a collective noun is used for all the opposition parties.

Before analyzing the discourse of the meme we need to know about the background of the meme. The meme is basically tweeted about the vote of confidence sought by (then the) PM Imran Khan. After the defeat of Imran Khan's finance minister in the senate election the opposition parties mounted pressure on him to seek a vote of confidence from the National Assembly (NA) to prove to the nation that he still held the majority sway of their representatives. Although Imran Khan succeeded in securing the majority but in his speech he attacked the opposition alliance as a corrupt mafia who were united to oust him from the PM's office. The discourse of text offers same criticism on the opposition parties by sympathizing with Imran khan in order to sway the public opinion by prompting them to support Imran Khan in his fight against the oppositions. Additionally, the text emphasizes on the negative portrayal of political opponents as corrupt mafia. And for this reason, the parochial lexical choices, we, indicating the 'us' and the corrupt mafia indicating 'them' are employed to create an antagonistic division between the two sides. 'We' the in groups (Imran Khan and his supporters) are implicitly described in a positive context (saviors against corruption). However, 'them' the oppositions are explicitly recognized in a negative context as bad and corrupt. In short, the discourse of text relies heavily on party/source cues to sway the public opinion through an antagonistic division of us and them.

On the other hand with regard to the iconographic analysis, the image presents an abstract background showing a bull fight. The bullfighter is represented as Imran khan (then the PM) and the bulls have been depicted as PML-N, PPP, MQM, PPP Sherpao (though now Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao chair Pashtun

nationalist Qaumi Watan Party) and ANP. Imran khan is depicted as a bullfighter fighting against the bulls the opposition parties. The image involves empathy towards Imran Khan as it insinuates, Imran Khan is alone in the fight against the corrupt oppositions. The bulls in eastern culture have negative denotation referring to brutality but in this particular meme it connotes a corrupt opposition mafia who have united against Imran Khan. The bullfighter holding 'muleta' (it is the small red flannel cloth) with "Tehrik-e-Insaf" (the name of Imran khan's party) written on it connotes Imran Khan and his supporters are the flag barriers of this fight against the bad.

In short, the image, like the text, reinforces the same 'us' and 'them' distinction by portraying opposition as a beast, corrupt and mindless creatures, united against the one and only logical and rational person Imran Khan.

### 4.6. Analysis of Figure 6

I saw the first selected Azam
in the history of Pakistan who
spends his holidays with dogs
even though he has children.
😂😂😂

#لاہورجلسے_سے_گھبراگیاسلیکٹڈ

imrankhan.pti
About Today

...



The text above the meme reads as: I saw the first selected Azam in the history of Pakistan who spends his holiday with dogs even though he has children. Looking at the lexical choices, the adverb 'first' suggests nothing like this has happened before. The lexis 'first' has been used in a negative context because it differentiates and distinguishes Imran Khan in a negative way. The noun 'selected Azam' is a neologism, which is introduced to replace Wazir-Azam an Urdu word for Prime Minister. This neologism is transcending from important tone to a discrediting one, labeling Imran Khan as a premier who has come through a selection by those whose constitutional role is something else.

The discourse of the meme not only labels Imran Khan as a selected through a neologism for mocking the legitimacy of his power but at the same time trivializes the personal life of Imran Khan as well. His preference of spending the holidays with pets (dogs) instead of family is presented as an oddity as the lexical units are giving the impression that Imran Khan is the first premier in the history of Pakistan who is anthropomorphizing dogs despite having two children. Unlike western culture, Pakistanis never consider their pets as their children. Therefore, this oddity has been presented as a habit that does not adhere to norms of Pakistani social practices. Hence, the meme trivializes Imran Khan to turn the public opinion against his habit or personal preferences rather than his policies.

The iconographic elements of the meme suggests no particular discourse as the image is only showing a green lawn of a rest house with trees and a building in the background. Imran khan is shown spending his

time by feeding his two pet dogs with a bowl in one hand and wearing a glove on the other hand. The image is complementing the discourse of the text.

4.7. Analysis of Figure 8



The text written above the memes reads: previously unseen photo of the stage from PDM jalsa yesterday. The lexical units in the text are mocking and making fun of the PDM leadership by drawing attention to the image of donkeys.

The discourse of text is based on the image which shows number of donkeys. They have been considered as PDM's leadership standing on the stage of their political rally at the city of Lahore at Minare-e-Pakistan. The Lahore rally of PDM was the most talked about event in terms of numbers of crowd and success. Examining the text, the meme is explicitly humiliating PDM leadership and making fun of them as the image shows them as poor, weak and with rejected political ideologies. The text and image at one hand shows them as helpless, dejected and rejected group, and on the other hand, is dehumanizing and derogating them by using an allegory of donkeys. Therefore, the uncivil dehumanized discourse can be seen as an ideological distinction between the in-group (the meme creator) and the out-group (PDM).

With regards to the iconographic aspects of the meme, the setting implies a stage from the PDM's political rally. The participants are depicted as animal, donkeys. The image employs an allegory of donkey to discriminate and insult the political adversaries. The allegory is associating political leadership of PDM to stubbornness and dividing them as weak. Hence, through allegory the meme suggests lack of positive qualities among the PDM leadership or points to their weak and rejected political ideology. This depiction suggests hostility of the meme creators towards PDM that explicitly shows insult and negative evaluation of them. This discourse hints to a sense of superiority of the meme creator (they) against PDM (the ideological others). Therefore, together with the text, the image is thereby adopting an uncivil dehumanized discourse.

## 5. Discussion

This section explain in details the preceding analysis and interpret the findings establishing its possible links with affective polarization.

In our analysis we came across discourses of (de)legitimization through authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and Mythopoesis in figure (1 to 4). Through (de) legitimizing discourses the meme creators have tried to inculcate the believes on the basis of which one party or group can be easily assessed as untrustworthy, incompetent, apolitical, alarming, weak, immoral and threatening to the democracy. Since, (de) legitimizing political memes not only shapes the political outcomes but also influence the users (Ross & River, 2017) as they discursively creates a negative image and character of political figures (Screti, 2013), therefore, we can say (de)legitimization in political memes decreases the positive and effective evaluation of the political opponents (Huntington, 2017) that contributes to affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018). Also, the (de)legitimizing memes in our study indicates the political identity of the meme's creators (Decker-Maurer, 2012) which have help them to

support and validate their political feelings (Milner, 2013 and Shifman, 2014). And since, we know, the ideological identity of one is the root cause of affective polarization (Mason, 2015) therefore, the (de)legitimizing political memes, by validating the ideological identity of the political meme's creators, help them in displaying disdain against their political opponents thus causing aversion among the viewers (Huntington, 2017).

Apart from the above (de) legitimization tactics, our study sample was found to have discourses of labeling (figure 1, 3 & 5). Labeling in our memes have acted as an ideological filter in the evaluation of the political out-groups that has caused the differentiation of us and them (Sheigal, 2005, p. 175). Labeling in the memes can be seen resulted in discrimination and extreme negative stereotyping, which are considered key mediators in affective polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018). In our memes various labels have been used for the rejection of the opponent political figures or groups as the 'others'. Therefore, in this study we assume, the ideological differences have motivated the meme's creators to label and negatively evaluate the political others/them by attributing derogating and stereotypical traits or qualities that, in turn, potentially stem affective polarization (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016).

Additionally, affective polarization has its roots in individual political identity (party affiliation) that encourage him/her to dislike, discriminate and create negative feelings towards them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). van Dijk (1995) terms this political identity as in-group and out-group opposition, where the in-groups (political allies, or supporters) described themselves positively, and the out-group (political opponent or adversaries) as negative. In some of our memes (figure 5) this us versus them differentiation was evidently found emphasizing the negative and bad image of the political opponent and de-emphasizing or denying the in-group negative characteristic. Such discourses have not only consolidated the integration of 'us' and differentiation from 'them' by reinforcing the existing dominant ideologies but can also play an integral role in affective polarization as such memes can potentially create a collective ideological identity (Mason, 2015) that divide the insiders from the out-siders by normalizing extreme views and disliking towards the political 'them'.

Furthermore, the analysis of some of our political memes also reveals discourses of dehumanization (figure 7). It refers to a harsh and inhuman treatment of an out-group in intergroup conflict, which consequently, induce discrimination and sometimes violence in extreme scenario (Sakki & Castrén, 2022). The role of dehumanization is also important in affective polarization (Harel et al., 2020) as in our sample the dehumanization discourses have functioned to reveal the inter-group ideological conflict and animosity against the political (others). This ideological conflicts and animosity tends to construct the superiority of in-group against the ideological others or out-groups by provoking differentiation and rejection (Fernández-Villanueva & Bayarri-Toscano, 2021). Moreover, such dehumanization discourses over time and exposure influences the way certain political figures and their supporters are viewed as they provoke negative emotions and hostility that are considered central to an affective polarization (Harel et al., 2020).

And lastly, during analysis of this study we also examined the existence of trivialization (figure 6). In political context, trivialization refers to those discourses that concern the private lives of the politicians with no connection to public policy (Lin, 2021). Though trivialization in our sample may have appeared humorous and non-serious, but since, they have been used to attack on personal lives of politicians, therefore, trivialized discourses in the memes result in the negative projection (Mutz, 2017) of the political figures. The trivialized memes in our study analysis suggests discrediting, disturbing and stereotyping of the political figures (or group), which decreases not only the positive evaluation but consequently derives interpersonal hostility and animosity among the people (Lin, 2021) that ultimately causes affective polarization.

## 6. Conclusion

There is no doubt in that political memes have specific political goals (Shifman, 2014; Denisova, 2016). In the same way, this study also reveals that different discourses communicated in the political memes have reinforced particular ideological/political identities that have invoked delegitimzation, labelling,

dehumaization, us versus them differentaion, and trivialization. These discourses have presented extreme negative evaluation of the other side with strong feelings of aggression and dasidain expressed through mockery, ridicules, insults, mistrust, and disapproval of that opposing side. Therefore, we says that political memes can potentially catalyzes affective polarization through its discourses dominated by (de)legitimzation, us versu them, labelling, dehumanizations and trivailization. In these discourses we analyzed, no new ideologies or political identities were communicated rather were dominated by the reinforcemnt of the exting ideological extermity & hostility, and political identities. Or in other words, political memes through its discourses have tried to sustained and represented the ideoligical identities and power of one group at the expanse of another.

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