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Political Humour and Citizen Participation: A Critical Qualitative Review of Hindi Political Memes on Instagram

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Abstract

What does sharing a political joke add to public life? Research on political memes does not give one clear answer. Some studies connect meme use with political expression. Others show that people who share political memes may not have a strong interest in politics. This paper reviews eleven sources and asks what their evidence can tell us about Hindi political memes on Instagram. It brings together research on meme formats, protest, user motives, Indian satire and internet research methods. The review argues that people can take part in political discussion by creating, sharing, changing or questioning a meme. However, these activities do not always lead to organised political action. Familiar images and film dialogues can help

readers understand a joke. They can also make it harder to question the claim behind it. Hindi captions need careful attention because script, vocabulary and cultural references affect who understands them. The paper compares published studies and uses a documented protest-meme example. It does not analyse a newly collected set of Instagram posts. Its contribution is a way to study what people do with political humour, with clear limits on what can be claimed about Hindi Instagram audiences.

Keywords: Hindi political memes, political humour, Instagram, citizen participation, cultural recognition, political communication

Introduction

People share political memes for different reasons. This becomes clear when we compare two studies. Halversen and Weeks found that creating and sharing political memes on Facebook was not linked with political interest in their study of American adults. They discuss how this differs from Johann's findings. The difference matters. Someone may share a meme because they already follow politics closely. Another person may share the same meme because it is funny or suits a conversation with friends. We cannot assume that both people have the same purpose.¹

This is a useful starting point for studying Hindi political memes on Instagram. An account may publish political jokes, but that does not tell us why people view or share them. A reader may enjoy a joke about a public figure without following politics regularly. Another reader may use it to comment on an issue they know well. Researchers need to ask what the post says and what the person does with it. Those are related questions, but they are not the same question.

A joke also asks readers to supply part of its meaning. It may compare a promise with what later happened. It may use a film character to make a public figure look powerful, confused or dishonest. Sometimes the caption leaves its main claim unstated because the writer expects readers to understand it. A summary of the words may miss how the image makes that claim work. Likes and comments tell us even less about what readers understood.

Shifman explains how familiar meme formats invite people to create new versions. This helps us see participation as something people do with a shared form. A user can change an image or caption and add a political point. We can examine that change. We then need further evidence to know whether it informs people, excludes them, persuades them or helps them organise. In this review, I ask what published research tells us about these activities and what remains to be studied in Hindi Instagram exchanges.²

Knowing Hindi does not mean understanding every Hindi joke. A caption may use Devanagari, Roman letters or English words. It may refer to an old film, a regional accent or a recent political event. Two people who read Hindi well may understand it differently because they do not share the same background knowledge. Recording the language of a post is therefore only a beginning.

I treat these differences as questions to investigate. This review does not assume that all Hindi-speaking readers form one audience. It contains no new audience data about how people understand these captions.

Research question and review method

The main question is how political humour becomes a way to take part in public discussion. I look at how people can adapt familiar images to make political points. I also compare how published studies connect meme creation, sharing and viewing with political

¹ Halversen, A., & Weeks, B. E. (2023). Memeing politics: Understanding political meme creators, audiences, and consequences on social media. *Social Media + Society*, 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231205588> (Discussion section).

² Shifman, L. (2014). The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 340–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546577> (Concluding Thoughts, Meme Genres as Operative Signs section).

expression or participation. The Hindi Instagram setting helps identify questions that these studies leave open. This is a review of published research. It does not include a content analysis of current Instagram accounts or interviews with their audiences.

I selected eleven sources published between 2012 and 2025. Ten are research articles and one provides guidance on internet research ethics. They cover meme formats, protest, user motives, participation, Indian satire and methods for studying visual media. The sources were chosen to compare different explanations, rather than to collect every publication on the topic. I examined publisher records, available articles and an author's university repository. Full texts supported the discussion of Shifman, Milner, Bennett and Segerberg, Leiser, Johann, and Halversen and Weeks, as well as the ethics guidance. For Kumar, Baishya, Rani and Yadav, and Highfield and Leaver, I used only the available abstracts and publication records. The discussion of these four sources stays within that material.

I compared what each study examined, whose experiences it included and what its method allowed it to conclude. A close reading of an image can explain how a political point is made. It cannot tell us how many people accept that point. Interviews can help explain users' motives, while surveys can show relationships between measured activities. These forms of evidence answer different questions. I have not combined their results into one numerical finding or reanalysed their data. Where the studies disagree, I explain the difference without claiming to have settled its cause. The argument that follows is my reading of the selected research, within the limits described above.

Borrowed images and the construction of a political argument

Milner's study of the Pepper Spray Cop memes shows how placing an image in a new setting can change its political meaning. The original image shows Lieutenant John Pike using pepper spray against seated protesters at the University of California, Davis. In the versions discussed by Milner, users placed the officer in fictional and historical scenes. Some scenes referred to resistance and public ideals. The officer remained recognisable, but the new setting widened the criticism. An image of one incident became a way to comment on authority and its treatment of people.³

The original photograph and the edited version do different work. The photograph records a scene whose date, people and circumstances can be investigated. The edited version asks readers to make a comparison. Milner discusses a version that places the officer beside an image of Rosa Parks. This brings a familiar struggle for rights into the reader's view of the police action. It does not prove that the two events are historically the same. It uses their placement together to suggest a judgement. Understanding the borrowed image helps the reader follow that judgement.⁴

Changing the setting can therefore add something to the argument. A new version may extend the criticism, sharpen it or take it

³ Milner, R. M. (2013). Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2357–2390. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1949> (pp. 2383–2387).

⁴ Milner, R. M. (2013). Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2357–2390. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1949> (p. 2386).

in another direction. Readers can compare the versions because they share a recognisable figure. Researchers should explain what the change contributes, while staying close to what the image supports. A small visual change should not become the basis for claiming that its creator holds a detailed political philosophy.

Reading an image closely still leaves an important question unanswered. Did its audience understand it in that way? One reader may recognise the reference and accept the comparison. Another may understand it but reject its politics. Someone else may know the meme format without knowing the event behind it.

These are possible responses, not findings from the example. Showing that an image allows a particular reading does not show that people actually read it that way.

Shifman's discussion helps explain why familiar formats matter. They give users a starting point and help readers notice what has changed. Much of the background is already shared, so a small alteration can make a political point. The useful question is what that alteration adds and how people respond to it. Simply counting how much of an image is new would miss much of its contribution.⁵

We also need to be careful about who receives credit for the action. The person who took the original photograph, the person who added the political caption and the person who reposted it may be different people. Collecting a meme from an account does not prove that the account created it. Sharing can still matter

because it brings an existing argument to another audience. But new readers may need context that earlier readers already had. Researchers should examine that act of sharing even when the image's full history is uncertain.

Indian satire and the problem of cultural recognition

Kumar places Indian online parody within local traditions of questioning authority and wider meme culture. His account draws attention to how repetition can produce new meanings when material enters a different setting. This suggests a useful question for Hindi memes. A familiar international format may change its meaning through Hindi wording, a new target or a local event. I use Kumar's argument to guide that question. I do not treat his article as a study of a collected set of Hindi Instagram posts.⁶

Baishya examines political humour used in criticism of the Hindu right wing in India. His work places satire within a particular political dispute. This reminds us to ask what readers need to know about that dispute. A joke may respond to an earlier speech, accusation or image that does not appear in the post itself. Its meaning can depend on what happened before it and on the responses that follow. Reading the meme alone may leave out the argument it is answering.⁷

⁵ Shifman, L. (2014). The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 340–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546577> (Meme genres and operative signs sections).

⁶ Kumar, S. (2015). Contagious memes, viral videos and subversive parody: The grammar of contention on the Indian web. *International Communication Gazette*, 77(3), 232–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048514568758> (Institutional abstract).

⁷ Baishya, A. K. (2021). The conquest of the world as meme: Memetic visibility and political humor in critiques of the Hindu right wing in India. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(6), 1113–1135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720986039> (Abstract).

Hindi script and Hindi vocabulary need separate attention. Romanised Hindi is Hindi written in Roman letters. Hindi-English mixing uses words from both languages. A caption in Roman letters is therefore not automatically Hinglish. A reader may struggle with the script, the words or both. Word choice matters too. A caption may sound respectful, friendly, mocking or distant. Its English translation may lose that tone. Researchers should read the caption alongside the image and explain these choices.

A borrowed film dialogue shows why background knowledge matters. The words may stay the same while the person they describe changes. A character's familiar role can make a political figure appear boastful, evasive or helpless. To follow the joke, readers may need to recognise both the film scene and the political event. This is a proposed way to examine such humour. It is not a finding that film dialogue dominates Hindi memes on Instagram. Its value is to help researchers ask what a post expects its readers to know.

A readable caption can still be an unfamiliar joke. Leiser's participants described how people who do not know meme conventions can feel excluded from political meme communication. Their accounts give us a reason to study this problem. They do not tell us which Hindi audiences experience it. Researchers would need to identify the reference that causes difficulty and ask who finds it difficult. They should also question their own familiarity. A dialogue that seems obvious to the researcher may mean little to someone with a different experience of films or social media.⁸

Translation needs the same care. An English version should not make a Hindi caption clearer or more formal than it was for its readers. A casual taunt should not become a serious allegation simply because of the translation. Keeping the original wording and explaining the cultural reference can help readers assess the interpretation. If the caption allows two meanings, the researcher should show both and explain why. Choosing only one may remove something the joke depends on.

Shared references can help people join a political conversation without using formal political language. Yet familiarity can also create pressure to agree. Readers may feel that they should laugh before asking whether a comparison is fair. We should therefore ask whether people can question the joke as well as understand it. A Hindi caption does not become inclusive simply because it uses Hindi. Inclusion also depends on how the exchange treats readers who disagree or need an explanation.

User motives and the disagreement about political interest

Leiser's study of twenty-five participants identifies self-expression, social identity and entertainment as connected reasons for using memes. Participants also describe memes as supporting other political activities, rather than replacing them. These motives can work together. A person may make a political point while entertaining friends or showing where they belong. We should not exclude a contribution from participation because it is

⁸ Leiser, A. (2022). Psychological perspectives on participatory culture: Core motives for the use of political Internet memes. *Journal of Social and Political*

Psychology, 10(1), 236–252.
<https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.6377> (Discussion section).

funny. We should also avoid assuming that every amusing share has a political purpose.⁹

An interview can help explain why a person shared an image on a particular occasion. But it is still that person's account of the action. People may explain it differently afterwards, give a socially acceptable reason or leave out something they considered obvious. Researchers can compare the explanation with the post and its context. They can learn from the account without treating it as a complete explanation of intention.

Johann's survey of 482 users connects political meme creation and sharing with participation and political efficacy. Political efficacy concerns whether people feel able to take part in politics and make a difference. His discussion acknowledges that participants selected themselves into the study and that its design cannot show which factor caused another. Someone who already feels politically capable may enjoy making memes. Making a meme might also help someone feel more capable. A relationship between the two cannot, by itself, tell us which explanation is correct.¹⁰

Halversen and Weeks studied 1,800 American adults at two points during the 2020 presidential election. They found that creating and sharing memes was not linked with political interest, while exposure to memes

was linked with participation. They warn against treating the exposure relationships as proof of cause and effect. Their findings do not show that all meme users lack political interest. They show that different activities need separate attention. Creating a meme, sharing it and encountering it are different experiences.¹¹

The way researchers recruit participants may help explain why studies differ. A study based in meme communities may reach people with a different relationship to memes from a study of a wider population. This is a possible explanation, not one established by this review. The platform, political setting and measures used may also matter. Calling the findings mixed is not enough. At the same time, claiming that sampling explains the difference would go beyond the evidence.

For a Hindi Instagram study, the practical lesson is to identify the activity clearly. A creator chooses an image, target and caption. A sharer chooses an existing post for another audience. A reader may think about it without making any public response. Combining all three into one engagement measure can hide these differences. The question should be which activity connects with which kind of political participation, and under what conditions.

Rani and Yadav provide an Indian example through a study of online political satire involving 800 people aged eighteen to thirty-five in four metropolitan cities. Their abstract reports a positive but weak relationship with

⁹ Leiser, A. (2022). Psychological perspectives on participatory culture: Core motives for the use of political Internet memes. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 10(1), 236–252. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.6377> (Abstract, non-technical summary and conclusion).

¹⁰ Johann, M. (2022). Political participation in transition: Internet memes as a form of political expression in social media. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 22(1), 149–164. <https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2022.01.3005> (Abstract and pp. 160–161).

¹¹ Halversen, A., & Weeks, B. E. (2023). Memeing politics: Understanding political meme creators, audiences, and consequences on social media. *Social Media + Society*, 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231205588> (Abstract and discussion).

political engagement. This is useful evidence, but its scope matters. The study concerns online satire more broadly and a particular group of urban young people. I cannot use it to produce a separate finding about Hindi Instagram memes. It supports further research in India while showing the need to define the format and audience carefully.¹²

These studies leave room to understand participation as political expression even when it does not lead to organised action. A meme can voice a complaint, question a public image or point out a contradiction. Researchers can examine those contributions in their own terms. Whether the user later joins a group is another question. However, expressing a complaint does not automatically improve public discussion. We still need to ask what the contribution says and how it treats people who respond.

Instagram as an encounter rather than a complete public

Highfield and Leaver discuss methods and ethics for studying visual social media, including images, GIFs, memes and emoji. Their approach supports reading the caption and image together. I do not use their publication to make claims about Instagram's current ranking system. This review focuses on how people can interpret available communication, rather than on how present-day recommendations work.¹³

Researchers can save an image, its caption and visible replies. However, readers may bring different histories to the post. A regular follower may know the account's usual position or a recurring character. A person who receives a copied image may know neither. A screenshot can preserve the image while losing those relationships. When they help explain the joke, they need attention from the start.

A favourable comment can mean several things. Does it praise the editing, agree with the accusation or applaud the creator? A reply might question a fact while accepting the broader complaint. Even an emoji can become difficult to interpret when removed from the conversation around it.

For such questions, studying the exchange may be more useful than studying one reaction. Nearby replies can help explain what a comment means. A qualitative account should show that evidence and keep uncertainty clear. It need not assign a fixed political position to every response.

Readers who do not comment are harder to study. Silence does not tell us whether someone understood the joke, rejected it or chose not to share it. These possibilities should not become unsupported claims about a silent majority. They show what public comments cannot reveal. Interviews about particular encounters could bring some of these decisions into the study, with the same care needed when interpreting other users' accounts.

The research question should guide what material is collected. To study how an account

¹² Rani, P., & Yadav, S. (2025). A whimsical wisdom: Exploring consumption of online political satire and its impact on political engagement of youth in India. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 13(3), 131–158. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2025.13.3.1039> (Abstract).

¹³ Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: Studying visual social media, from

selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1155332> (Abstract).

addresses readers, its posts and exchanges may be suitable. To study how a joke changes as it circulates, researchers need related versions, including versions outside that account. An Instagram focus can be useful, but it does not contain the whole history of every image. Researchers should explain whether their conclusions concern an account, one version, a series of exchanges or the movement of a format between settings.

When an interpretation becomes a call to act

Bennett and Segerberg explain how personal forms of communication can help connect people around shared concerns. Their account of connective action shows why adaptable expressions may matter for organisation. It also recognises that their spread depends on how people adopt them. For memes, the question is what happens between repeating a shared expression and arranging action around it. Similar wording may connect a complaint across a network. It does not show all the relationships and practical work needed to organise.¹⁴

A joke can make a criticism easy to repeat without saying what should happen next. It may blame a public figure without identifying the institution that could address the problem. That does not make the criticism worthless. It means that making a political point and organising a response are different achievements. If a caption invites action, researchers can examine the invitation and the

replies. Questions about time, access and participation may show people discussing practical arrangements. To claim mobilisation, however, researchers still need evidence that people acted on the invitation.

An informal meme can also come from an organised group. Citizens, activists and political parties may use similar images while having very different resources. The appearance of a post does not establish who produced it. Researchers should distinguish what the image means from what they know about its origin. Verified information about its creator can strengthen the analysis. Where the creator is uncertain, that uncertainty should remain clear.

Participation need not follow one fixed path from viewing to sharing to organised action. Someone may accept a political point without forwarding it. Another person may forward it without accepting its invitation to act. What matters is the connection made in the particular encounter. This approach allows us to study expression without assuming that every contribution leads to mobilisation.

Democratic judgement and the ethics of interpretation

Taking part in political discussion does not automatically make a contribution democratic. A meme may raise a public concern while mocking another group because of its identity. Both can appear in the same image. Researchers need to ask what the joke requires readers to accept in order to share its criticism. Looking only at its political topic may miss how it denies other people respect or a chance to answer.

Irony can make this judgement difficult. A post may repeat an offensive statement to

¹⁴ Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661> (pp. 744–748).

expose it, or it may repeat the statement with approval. The caption alone may not settle the question. The image and replies may support different readings. Researchers should explain the evidence for each reading. A neat interpretation is not always the best-supported one. Sometimes the ambiguity is part of how the post reaches different readers.

An obviously impossible image can still carry a real accusation. Its absurd appearance does not prove that accusation. Exaggeration alone does not establish misinformation either. I would first identify the claim beneath the joke and ask whether readers can question it. A joke does not need to become a full news report. But it deserves closer attention when its familiar format makes an unsupported claim seem settled and discourages requests for evidence.

Research publication can create new risks for the people whose words appear in it. The Association of Internet Researchers asks researchers to consider context and risk throughout a project. Quoting a public comment in an article may make the person easier to find. Removing a username may not help if the wording or image remains searchable. Yet changing the wording can weaken an analysis that depends on it. Researchers need to decide what evidence readers must see and what risks displaying it creates. Public availability does not settle those decisions.¹⁵

Keeping a secure research record and publishing it are separate choices. Researchers may need contextual details for analysis

without placing all of them in the article. A screenshot should support the argument, rather than serve only as decoration. Its possible risks need consideration. If changing names or wording affects the interpretation, the researcher should explain the change. This review reproduces no original user material. A future study using this approach would still need to address these decisions.

Discussion and limitations

The review connects a meme's form with what people do through it. It examines the image and caption, how they reach an audience and the responses they receive. A changed caption may add a political point. It does not reveal every viewer's motive or the outcome of the exchange. The differences between user studies make this distinction necessary.

A Hindi study would need to examine readers' background knowledge. Script, vocabulary and cultural references shape what a post explains and what it expects readers to know. Comparing versions could show what a change adds. Interviews could help explain why readers understand it differently. Simply showing that Hindi feels familiar would not answer these questions.

This review has limits. Its eleven selected sources do not represent all available research. Four were accessible only through abstracts or publication records. The protest example comes from another political setting. The user studies do not establish how Hindi Instagram audiences behave. I offer an approach and questions for further study, rather than a measure of local effects. The disagreement about political interest remains open. This comparison cannot isolate why the studies reached different findings.

¹⁵ franzke, a. s., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0*. Association of Internet Researchers. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf> (p. 6, section 2.3.4, and section 3.1).

Conclusion

A political meme gives people a view of public affairs that they can repeat, change or challenge. Humour helps make that possible by asking readers to recognise a connection and complete part of the argument. For Hindi memes on Instagram, we need to ask how people use those views. What helps them understand the joke? Can they question its claim? The research reviewed here gives reasons to study these encounters. It does not establish how often they occur or what effects they have among Hindi audiences.

The different findings of user studies leave useful work to do. Seeing a meme, making one and sharing it are different activities. Familiarity with memes does not reveal a person's level of political interest. Studying the surrounding exchange can help explain a contribution without assuming that it leads to organised action.

A democratic judgement asks whether people can understand the argument, question its assumptions and respond to it. Following these responses could help a Hindi Instagram study explain how citizens take part in public discussion. The popularity of an image cannot provide that explanation on its own.

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