



Memos and Engagement: The Role That Memos Can Play in Providing Engaging Narratives Over Mainstream Media



Rudranshu Sengupta

Abstract: *The paper aims to understand how memos can create engaging narratives over mainstream media. Memos are playing a major role in the social media strategies of political movements, businesses and sportspeople. While memos may not be considered a viable source of factual information, they can humorously present ideas to an increasingly distracted generation. Thematic (identifying patterns) and semiotic (memos being the sign) analysis are often used to derive meaning. In this paper, the main focus will be on thematic analysis. For the study, eleven memos on various political issues were identified and included in a survey with open-ended questions. The results found varying answers on the different issues, but memos related to taxation policy and national defence (Operation Sindoor) were the most easily identifiable.*

Keywords: Memos, Media, Mainstream Media, Themes, Interpretation

Nomenclature:

INDIA: Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance

I. INTRODUCTION

Easy access to the internet not only broke several barriers but also, in many ways, diminished the dominance of traditional mass media. With COVID-19 and the lockdowns, the vulnerabilities of the old bastions of broadcast and print were laid bare in India and around the world. According to the recent FICCI-EY Indian media industry report for 2024-25, television revenues fell by 6% for the second consecutive year, with ad volumes declining significantly [30]. Given the sheer volume of information available online, it is reasonable to assume that visuals significantly affect the viewership of any piece of information. While print media continues to survive, growth remains more or less stagnant, with subscription revenue falling. In such an environment, new media continue to shine. With falling attention spans and ever-demanding schedules, younger Millennials and Gen Z have sought comfort in reels and memos. The word 'meme' was originally coined by an evolutionary biologist

Richard Dawkins. The term referred to 'a certain idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person' within the confines of a culture. While to the average layman today, the term connotes something vastly different, the basic function of the meme as an idea remains the same. Memos, in today's parlance, refer to humorous images, GIFs, and video clips, often featuring text, that are shared as reactions to certain events, actions, or people. They are a unique means of communication that has developed through social networking sites and forums, enabling people to communicate their ideas and opinions freely (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Shalevska, 2018) [1]. Popular Meme Templates, like Pepe the Frog and 'Side Eyeing Chloe' (see Fig.11), are the best examples of this remixing. According to Dawkins, memos that spread successfully incorporate three basic properties- longevity, fecundity (imitability), and copy fidelity (accuracy). The internet enhances all three qualities. Memos can be analysed based on factors such as relevance to areas of interest, attitudes, humour, and tribalistic tendencies. These factors decide the resonance of the memos, apart from virality (Andersson, 2023) [2]. Most memos depict reality, often harshly, critically, or humorously, thereby making criticism less rude or harsh (Al Rousan et al., 2023) [3]. They can best be described as cultural texts that convey messages and playfully present the social context and beliefs of societies (Deus et al., 2022) [4]. The overall effect of memos can be multifaceted, with psychological, cultural, and social dimensions. As such, past research has focused on looking at memos through the lens of several media and sociological theories- Uses and Gratification (Das, 2023) [5], Diffusion of Innovation and even fuzzy-trace theory (Brace and Wolfe, 2025) [6]. There are a few key elements that typically make up a meme: 1) humour, 2) fostering in-group identity, 3) caricatures, 4) replicability, 5) a collapse of context and 6) low reputational cost (Anderrau and Barbarussa, 2024) [7]. These factors make it popular among ordinary 'netizens', who might feel disaffected by their countries' leadership classes. For this paper, the primary focus will be on using thematic analysis.

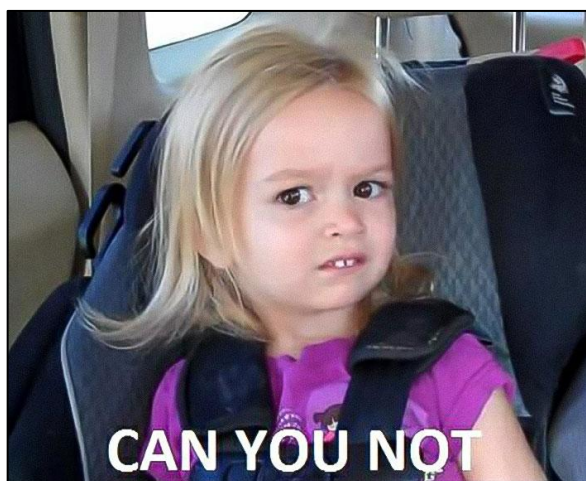
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[Fig.1: Screenshot from Side-Eyeing Chloe (2013), YouTube. The Video Ended up Becoming Viral, and Remains in Use in Some Form to this Day]

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERNET MEMES AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While Dawkins originally coined the term in the 70's, the term 'internet meme' fell to Mike Godwin in the June 1993 issue of Wired magazine. The origins of the modern meme are often traced back to emoticons- representations of facial expressions through text-based messages, using letters and punctuation marks (The smiley emoticon “:-)”, first used by Scott Fahlman in 1982, is often considered the very first meme. In the 90's, memes began to be used frequently on online message boards and even on Usenet groups. Memes like the 'Dancing Baby', 'All your base are belong to us' and 'ROFLCopter' frequently featured in these groups. At the turn of the millennium, memes slowly began to enter mainstream internet culture, partly thanks to 4chan, the controversial imageboard website. Popular meme templates like 'lolcats' started becoming widespread during the spread. The 2010's brought memes into regular parlance, thanks to the growth of social media during this period. Video-based memes, thanks to the release of YouTube, also became quite popular- scenes such as 'NO GOD PLEASE NO!' from *The Office* became a commonly used meme template. It was during this period that political groups realised the utility of memes and the purposes they could serve. According to Bescow, political actors saw the power of memes to appeal to various groups and subgroups and thus began using them to disseminate political messages (Bescow, Kumar and Carley, 2020) [8]. The 2016 United States Presidential Election is often known as the meme election, with groups associated with the candidate Donald Trump using memes effectively. This created an almost grassroots-level campaign, which was free from the hegemony of mainstream media (Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019) [9]. A combination of memes and street art was also used during the 2019-20 Hong Kong protests (Wu, 2022) [10]. As Denisova established, memes became a low-cost, low-risk means for people to express their opinions, rather than constantly relying on mainstream media (Denisova, 2019) [11]. This creates an alternative ecosystem of sorts, which, as the recent Gen Z protest in Nepal has shown, along with other mitigating factors, can be a powerful crucible for

dissent. Hence, memes can be referred to as 'tactical media'- a set of temporary, provocative media acts, rather than creating a sustained, formalised media sphere.

The real power of political communication on the internet lies in anonymity. This encourages meme-makers to put forward their criticism or support for particular candidates. Despite the anonymity of the internet, meme-makers can create a sense of shared political identity, crafted through a completely bottom-up, non-hierarchical structure (Bovan and Mikasonovic-Komso, 2024) [12]. Mortensen and Neumayer (2021) [13] contend that any disruption caused by memes is typically more playful. Traditionally, what has been seen as disruptive politics has been fiery oratory, sloganeering, or large demonstrations. However, memes create a sense of togetherness and lend a shared voice to various groups through humour, while increasing political polarisation. Ahmed and Masood (2024) [14] suggested that exposure to political memes mobilises individuals with high levels of political cynicism. Previously disinterested or disengaged groups can even be mobilised to engage in active political participation. According to Moreno-Almeida (2021) [15], internet memes have the power to build narratives and start conversations that may be silenced in the mainstream media. Before the advent of the internet, narratives about politics and culture were set by either the media or those in the current power structure, i.e., politicians, bureaucrats, lobbyists, or other power brokers. Memes, on the other hand, can be seen as a form of citizen-initiated political participation (McLoughlin and Southern, 2021) [16]. To some extent, this mobilisation can be initiated by a perceived media bias against certain political factions, who might hold seemingly controversial values. Jarvis and Jennings observed that in the United States, supporters of the Republican Party and the 'mainstream media' have had an adversarial relationship, which fuels this mistrust (Jarvis and Jennings, 2017) [17]. Another factor in the use of memes is the lack of formal panel discussions and debates. It has the capacity to engage individuals in ways that require extensive preparation or knowledge (Alafnan, 2025) [18]. In fact, memes might be used as standard fare in political communication, during speeches and debates, as a way of questioning authority (Lopez-Paredes and Carillo-Andres, 2022) [19]. Because political memes are often used to question rather than praise, there is a slant towards the negative. Memes often create a negative view of political figures and reduce their legitimacy as leaders (Ross and Rivers, 2017) [20]. Dean notes a certain unease among political scientists and commentators when addressing social media and digital politics (Dean, 2019) [21]. He argues that this hesitation and unease need to be avoided if the issues addressed in the new era of digital politics are to be answered.

Scholars assert that these memes are typically frivolous in nature; their value lies not in content but in serving as a voice for expressing discontent to the public, one free from the constraints of traditional media. Memes, according to Olena, could be seen as an information product (a compilation of data, information, and knowledge) of





society and a result of its intellectual and artistic practices. According to the author, the popularity of internet memes arose in response to the growth of information chaos (an overwhelming, disorganised state of information) and to efforts to make sense of it (Olena et al., 2020) [22]. As stated by Domegoj and Marija, memes have developed into a form of ‘anarchic folk propaganda’ with no centralised structure, making it, as established above, a grassroots-dominated form of disseminating information (Bebic and Volarevic, 2018) [23].

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND METHODOLOGY

In past research, several different theories were used. Since this paper mainly focuses on the analysis of memes, it can be viewed through the lens of two different methods- Semiotic or Thematic Analysis. If the meme is taken as the signifier, then the meaning and themes derived from it are the signified or the connotation. Fateema, Ejaz, and Miran (2025) [24] emphasised the power of semiotics in visual signs, which can contribute to the maintenance and perpetuation of ideological and cultural-political narratives. As a result, memes can simplify political narratives, attract public attention, and build awareness (Pranata and Widayatama, 2025) [25]. Memes, through signs, can paint a picture of what a person is not being told about, by deconstructing ideologies (Calimbo, 2016) [26]. For this paper, thematic analysis will serve as the primary methodological and theoretical foundation. Qualitative data collection through interviews and even surveys is often used in research on memes. Thematic analysis is used with quantitative data sets to identify patterns by examining the themes and motifs that emerge. This largely hinges on the context of the meme, or the issue that is addressed, as memes are constantly changing, especially those with common templates. Memes typically encompass a range of topics and address social issues within a nation (Dugalich and Ebzeeva, 2024) [27]. Any meme’s connection to a topic or a culture is established through the subject matter, the language used or any specific terminology. Bauer and Ngondo (2022) [28] found that meme makers seek common ground with various groups (in this research, academic mothers) by communicating themes that can be related to.

The main issue addressed in this paper is the possible role memes can play in creating narratives at a basic level, in front of the mainstream media. An initial survey of 50 memes was conducted, and the sample was narrowed to 11. These memes were taken from various popular mainstream political topics, such as national defence, urban development, and financial news. The form contained a series of subjective questions mainly focused on a) what the central topic being addressed was, and b) what the themes being alluded to were. Based on their knowledge, the respondent will answer the questions. This is conducted to assess respondents’ overall ability across various age groups to identify central and connecting themes, which will be examined in due course. One such example is also provided in (a). The themes presented by the respondents will then be analysed, and a pattern in the responses will be examined.

IV. THE MEMES AND RESULTS EXAMINED

One of the memes presented in the survey is given above. The other memes presented were the following:

- A. Operation Sindoor,
- B. The state of urban development in the city of Malegaon,
- C. Language Parochialism in Maharashtra,
- D. Rahul Gandhi is living in denial when it comes to election results,
- E. Changes in tax regime,
- F. Irrelevance of the Congress Party during the 2025 Delhi Vidhan Sabha Elections,
- G. Ceaselessness of whoever is writing the news ticker (see (b)),
- H. Irlevance of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena,
- I. Fickle-minded nature of political alliances.

The memes selected represent a wide range of topics, using humour to deride or even praise. Some of the memes share common themes: nationalistic pride (1), a lack of focus on important issues and political instability (2, 3, and 4), and increasing political irrelevance and the sidelining of figures and parties (6 and 8). The memes were largely gathered from social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook, as well as from Telegram posts. The selected posts were largely drawn from Indian Political Topics and were typically sarcastic, used to attack political opposition.



[Fig.2: A Meme on Operation Sindoor, taking a Scene From the 1998 Film, Soldier, Used in the Study]

The original template is taken from the 1998 movie *Soldier*, starring Bobby Deol. This scene is a reference to the days following the Pahalgam terrorist attack, leading up to the missile strikes on Pakistan-based militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Nationwide civil defence mock drills were conducted across several parts of India in the lead-up to the strikes. Among the responses, the consensus was to use these drills as cover, thereby shifting attention away from the real operation. Overall, according to



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the responses, the themes central to the meme were patriotism, admiration for the armed forces, and their work.



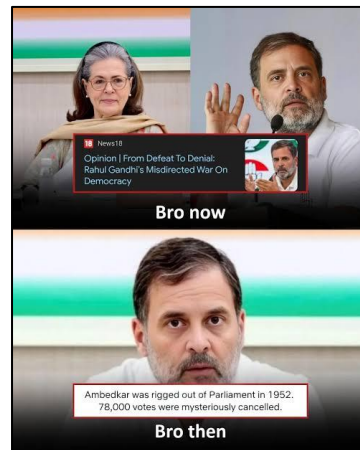
[Fig.3: A Meme on How Things Stay the Same, Despite the Promises of the Political Party. Used in the Study]

The meme depicts the current state of development in the city of Malegaon in Maharashtra. Despite being an important junction among major cities like Nashik, Pune, and Mumbai, the overall condition of roads and public facilities remains a major issue, with political parties passing the buck to one another. The meme depicts Malegaon's suffering as political parties pass the buck. The responses largely share a common theme: political parties point fingers at each other, come to power, and do little to improve the lives of ordinary people. In many ways, it is a tragic irony of politics: political parties bicker with each other, but when it comes to actually acting on electoral promises, they do nothing.



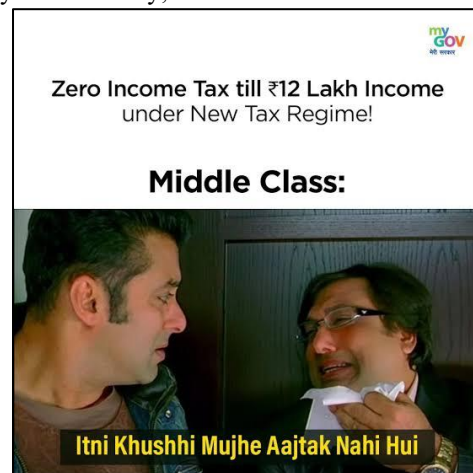
[Fig.4: A Campaign Poster by the Shiv Sena-UBT in Urdu]

The Thackeray Brothers were recently in the news for not only their reunion, but also for their so-called defence of 'Marathi Asmita'. To that end, both the Shiv Sena (UBT) party and MNS workers had engaged in a campaign of harassment and intimidation of shopkeepers and workers from the Hindi heartland. However, as seen in this Urdu poster, there seems to be a completely different treatment for another community. The responses clearly highlight this hypocrisy. This so-called regional pride clearly does not extend to a supposed 'vote bank'. The respondents clearly highlighted the theme of linguistic parochialism and its double standards, which have also been seen in Karnataka.



[Fig.5: Meme used for the Study, Pointing to Rahul Gandhi's Hypocrisy on the Topic of Alleged Electoral Rigging]

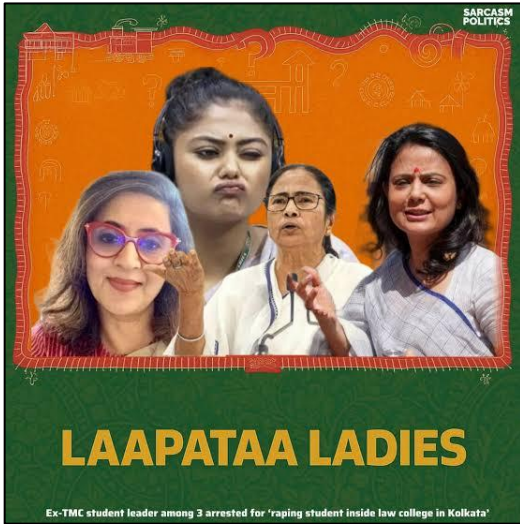
Congress leader Rahul Gandhi seems to be hellbent on proving that the electoral system is rigged in favour of the ruling party. From time to time, he has provided 'proof' of rigging in electoral rolls and mass cancellations of votes, but without much avail. This has increased in recent months, with back-to-back losses in State Elections and the ongoing Special Intensive Revision process in Bihar. Respondents pointed out that such claims were making him an object of ridicule. The meme clearly targets the ridiculousness of these claims. Some respondents also highlighted a theme of pointing out the hypocrisy of the Congress Party, as the meme also mentions the 1952 General Election in the North Bombay Constituency, which B.R. Ambedkar lost.



[Fig.6: A Meme on Middle Class Relief from the Tax Burden, Scene Taken from the 2007 Movie, Partner]

The template is taken from a scene in the 2007 movie Partner, starring Salman Khan and Govinda. The meme comes in response to announcements in the 2025 Union Budget, which featured revised tax slabs- specifically the announcement of zero income tax till 12 Lakh Rupees annual income, which also includes an enhanced rebate of 60000 Rupees. The respondents highlighted a possible sense of relief among the middle class, who often bear the brunt of expenses and taxation. The primary theme highlighted is the lightening of the tax burden for the Indian middle class.





[Fig.7: A Satirical post, Parodying the 2023 Film of the Same Name. Used After Some High-Profile Cases, Involving Several Crimes Against Women, Including the RG Kar and South Calcutta Law College Cases]

The title of this meme is taken from the 2023 film of the same name. This meme is a direct response to the alleged gang rape of a 24-year-old student in South Calcutta Law College. Three individuals were arrested, including a TMC student leader and a temporary staff member, Manojit Mishra. This incident follows the RG Kar rape case. This meme is directed towards the TMC leadership, primarily Lok Sabha MPs Mohua Moitra and Sayoni Ghosh, Rajya Sabha MP Sagarika Ghosh and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. These four women are often praised and criticised for their outspoken nature and confrontational attitude towards the Central Government. However, in this incident, they were largely silent. The themes respondents allude to include the hypocrisy of the state leadership and how these otherwise vocal leaders remain silent about the deteriorating law and order in West Bengal.



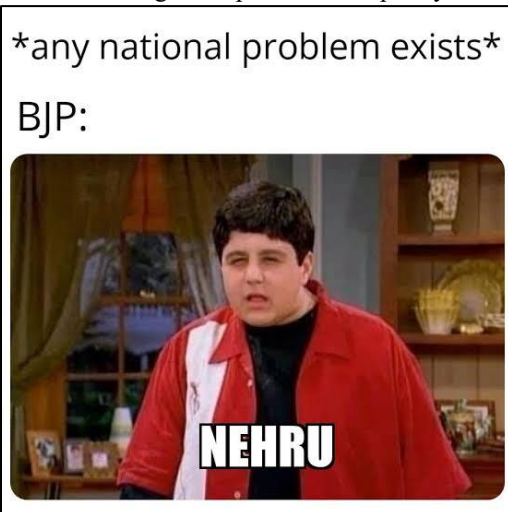
[Fig.8: Meme Which Addresses the Congress's Poor Electoral Performance in the 2025 Delhi Vidhan Sabha Elections]

In the 2025 Delhi Vidhan Sabha Elections, the once-dominant Indian National Congress was left with zero seats for the third election in a row. This meme reflects the downfall of the Congress, which once had 3-time CM Sheila Dixit. The respondents noted that the party is depicted as a casual bystander in this Election. The theme that was discerned from the responses was the irrelevance and passivity of the party's electoral machinery.



[Fig.9: *Translation: Amit Shah will have his Last Rites at 4:00 pm. A Reaction Meme, Featuring a Scene from the Popular Web Series, Mirzapur]

The template is taken from a scene in the web series *Mirzapur*, with Amit Shah's face morphed in place of Pankaj Tripathi. It is a reaction to a news report on the death of Ratan Tata, with the headline on the graphic being- 'Amit Shah will have his last rites at 4:00 pm. This reaction clearly highlights a major faux pas by the news channel. Respondents identified that such careless errors can sometimes cause the spread of fake news and misinformation. Some respondents identified a broader theme of deteriorating news presentation quality.



[Fig.10: A Meme, Made using a Scene from the Popular Nickelodeon Sitcom 'Drake & Josh' (2004-2007)]

The template is taken from the popular American sitcom *Drake and Josh*. It is a reference to how the present ruling dispensation has a habit of laying the blame for any problem at the feet of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, rather than actually solving the problem. The respondents have pointed out that the BJP has a habit of invoking Nehru whenever it sees an opportunity. The theme emerging from respondents' responses highlights the ridiculousness of blaming one person for all of the country's problems.



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[Fig.11: A Meme Centred on the Political Irrelevance of Raj Thackeray]

When Raj Thackeray broke away from the Shiv Sena and, by extension, his brother Uddhav, to form the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, a lot of hype was created around him. However, his party's performance of 13 seats in the 2009 Maharashtra Vidhan Sabha Election would prove to be the nadir of his political legacy. Since then, as depicted in this meme, he has achieved nothing of note. In both the 2024 Lok Sabha Election and the 2024 Vidhan Sabha Election, the MNS has drawn a blank. The respondent noted that the central theme was the complete irrelevance of the MNS and of Raj Thackeray as a political force in Maharashtra.



[Fig.12: A Meme Showing How Quickly Political Unity Falls Apart]

The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc was formed on 17 July 2023, with much fanfare. However, cracks soon began to form- Nitish Kumar, the man who spearheaded the campaign for a united opposition, would go back to the NDA Camp again, a couple of months later. Mamata Banerjee refused to work with the Left Front, owing to her efforts to overthrow them from power in West Bengal. By the time the 2024 Lok Sabha Election came to an end, member parties were at loggerheads with each other. In the 2025 Delhi Vidhan Sabha Election, the AAP and Congress went their separate ways. Respondents saw a theme of Indian political Parties forming alliances solely to defeat one individual.

Observations indicated that such short-term alliances tend to break apart easily due to power struggles and the absence of a binding ideology.

V. CONCLUSION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE STUDY

All in all, there were 15 respondents in the final survey. The responses to the memes more or less followed a theme, with some contradictions that might have depended on the person's political bias. For instance, in Fig.10, a few respondents tried to paint Nehru in a negative light, thereby contradicting the meme's central message. The two most easily identifiable memes were Fig.2 and Fig.4. Fig.2 was centred on Operation Sindoor and naturally dominated the news cycle fairly recently. Fig.4 focused on language parochialism, which had become recent news online, owing to a recent spate of attacks and intimidation on shopkeepers and North Indian workers in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra. Fig.6, which focused on the government's taxation policy, was also easily identifiable. From this, it can be concluded that the popularity of memes and how easily identifiable they tend to be often depended on the issues trending on social media or in the news cycle. Fig.7 focuses on the politics of the state of West Bengal, which has been dominated by the RG Kar case and the events that transpired at South Calcutta Law College. In the study, based on the few memes gathered, participants with even a little passing knowledge of the topic could form a rudimentary understanding of what the meme is trying to say. While memes are hardly factual in nature, with a picture and a few words, or even a GIF, they can certainly offer up a part of a story or the beginnings of a narrative. As Laurent established, memes, when considered individually, mostly contribute to a broader story or narrative rather than being progenitors of one (de Saint Laurent, Glavenau and Literat, 2021) [29].

This study mainly examined how memes can be analysed for themes and how they can play a role in creating engaging narratives about issues in conversation or within the wider information cycle. A more in-depth study with a larger sample size can explore how memes create broader narratives through proper narrative analysis. Studies can explore how memes support or sometimes challenge mainstream media narratives, using discourse analysis. Amid the turbulent Nepal Gen-Z protests, other mitigating circumstances, such as political and economic instability, fanned the discontent, but memes and hashtags certainly amplified the narrative. This event should be explored in the broader global context and its possible implications for social media's power.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

- **Conflicts of Interest/ Competing Interests:** Based on my understanding, this article has no conflicts of interest.



- **Funding Support:** This article has not been funded by any organizations or agencies. This independence ensures that the research is conducted with objectivity and without any external influence.
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- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The adequate resources of this article are publicly accessible.
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Papers Presented

- 1) *Memes and Engagement: The role that memes can play in providing engaging narratives over Mainstream Media*- AMIC Annual Conference, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai
- 2) *Nationalism in Indian Cinema: The Changing Portrayal of the Kashmir Conflict in Indian Cinema, from Roja to Article 370 and The Kashmir Files*- International Conference on Indian Cinema, IIM Ranchi
- 3) *Media Representation of Feminine in terms of Indian Knowledge Systems: Examining the Film Jai Santoshi Maa through transformative paradigms*- National Conference on Intersecting Identities, Techno India University. Presented jointly with Dr Maumita Sengupta, Associate Professor, Techno India University.

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