

Research Article

From Thanos to Arya Stark: Influence of Meme War in Indian Lok Sabha Election 2019

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How to cite this article:

Pandey N. From Thanos to Arya Stark: Influence of Meme War in Indian Lok Sabha Election 2019. *J Adv Res Jnl Mass Comm* 2022; 9(1&2): 14-21.

Date of Submission: 2022-04-07

Date of Acceptance: 2022-06-02

A B S T R A C T

In the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, one of the largest celebration of Indian democracy, political parties and candidates put forth content on various social media channels throughout the election process. When Modi dominated the debate during the 2014 Lok Sabha election, social media sprang onto the forefront. This time, however, his competitors look to be catching up. No party fell behind in interacting via social media or conducting political advertising. According to Google and Facebook data, 27 crores was spent on social media advertising. Media consumers were creating tens of thousands of fan sites and profiles. Numerous forms of content circulated over social media. Memes, the newest form of political speech, was among them. Throughout the whole election campaign period, up until the date of the poll results, social media was swamped with humorous memes. All were exploited to create memes on social media, from Avengers: Endgame and Game of Thrones characters and events to Bollywood movies and actors-actresses. An exploratory study employing content analysis and survey techniques as research methods is conducted to investigate how much value users place on memes and identify the various types of memes circulated during the election. An advanced Twitter search engine utilizing the hashtag #Lok SabhaElections2019 was used to extract a sample of 108 memes made on the microblogging site Twitter. The electoral commission of India provided the hashtag. In addition, a survey of media consumers and journalists was done using a standardized questionnaire. This outcome led us to the significant conclusion that there is no conclusive proof that memes directly influence voters' political decisions.

Keywords: Memes, Lok Sabha Election 2019, Political Discourse, Social Media, Twitter

Tracing back to History

The concept of meme was first given by Richard Dawkins in his book 'The Selfish Gene (1976)'. According to Dawkin, memes is a product of culture which explain how rumors, catch-phrases, melodies or fashion trends multiplies and diffuse from one to another through different channels within a population. The origin of the word meme comes from the Greek word mimeme which means 'to imitate'

(Dawkins, 1989). However, the similar occurrence of something what we today called as an internet meme can be traced back to 1754 when Pennsylvania Gazette published a piece of image created by Benjamin Franklin. In that image a snake was cut into eight parts and each parts was labelled with the initials of American colonies (as cited by Antal). Many scholars also referred to memes as next generation of caricatures prevalent in England in the 1700s

Journal of Advanced Research in Journalism and Mass Communication (ISSN: 2395-3810)

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and after revolution in France to pass on satirical comment. And then because of the advancement in technological development of printing presses, it was used heavily in newspaper and magazines afterwards (De Silva & Garcia 2012), a trend or practice which is continued till date. With the advent of internet and digital technologies, the word 'Internet Meme' came and it gained widespread popularity. According to Ackerman (2012), memes have now become an integral part of election in this age of digital media. Now a days, internet meme are one form of user generated digital media content and it has become a part of popular culture. This is leading media users towards political participations and engagements. Shiffman who has authored book *Meme in digital culture* (2013) has said "Politicians across democracies try to assimilate into popular culture as well as add humour in their campaigns,"

Related Works

Bozkus (2016) noted that the Internet memes carry a set of symbols and ideals with them that transmit socio-political structure on the Internet. Luqui (2018) opined that Internet enabled citizens to participate in the manufacturing of online counter-hegemony discourse. Knobel (2006) explored memes as a cultural phenomenon and new literary practices. He adds that meme is an infectious form of cultural information that shape and transmit key actions and mindsets of social group from one mind to another directly. Humor is one of the most effective ways of responding to politics. Political humor has so many functions. It enable politicians to make their point of view, to vent out their frustration and anger. On the other hand, it also give platform to political critics to expose evils, oppression, show offs etc. (Nilsen, 1990). Huntington (2016) analyzed the affect and effect of internet memes. Findings indicate that political memes attempts at conveying arguments beyond mere jokes. The results of this study also indicate that user-generated media like political internet memes are an important influence in today's media environment, and have implications for other forms of political outcomes, including concerns about opinion polarization, civic discourse, and the public sphere. People use memes to contribute to public conversations about political events going on in the world around them (Milner, 2013).

Significance of the Study

Shiffman (2014) in his study described different types of memes and their role in digital culture. Bauckhage (2011) explained the way memes diffused. Milner (2013 & 2014) explored meme as a form of political discourse by public during Occupy Wall Street movement. All of these research work is conducted in foreign countries. However, despite the growing popularity of memes in Indian election too, no research in India hasn't been conducted so far either about

memes or its impact & significance on politics or the reason why people usually create and share these memes as far as researcher awareness goes. India recently witnessed its biggest festival of democracy completed within a period of almost two and half months (10th March-23rd May, 2019) in the form of Lok Sabha Election 2019. As per the reports of hindi daily Dainik this time around 8.5 crores were the first time voters. Around two-thirds of Indians are under the age of 35, 43 crore Indians owning a smartphone, half a billion using the Internet, 30 crore using Facebook, 20 crore sending messages on WhatsApp and 3 crore users on Twitter (NDTV.com, 14 May, 2019). According to a news report published in Economic Times e-paper, ahead of the general election in India, Google and facebook too had released fundings spent on advertisements on them and their sister platforms by both the national parties BJP as well as INC. As per their statistics, a total of 27 crores were spent altogether by different political parties on its platforms. BJP emerges as the single largest party to spent around 20 crores through its official account and INC spent around 2.7 crores. The 2014 Lok Sabha Election saw the impact of digital campaigning. Hence, this time political parties understood this that to win the confidence of voters especially young ones, the election now can't be fought without internet. An interview given by Ashish Merkhed, State head for IT & Social Media head, Maharashtra BJP to DNA website, that recently we posted a meme and it got around 1,200 shares and recorded more than six lakh views. He further added that we did not even promoted it. And this is the power of memes. We have been getting extremely positive feedback on memes from youngsters, which we believe will also convert into crucial votes in the upcoming polls. So, it's quite clear that all the parties came prepared with their digital media strategy vociferously. Many researchers sought to understand the effect of media content on political discourse and citizen engagement. But, it has to be understood that the effect of user-generated content could differ from traditional media content. Along this line, it is important to look at how exactly memes as messages influence people who view them. How much importance they are giving to the political meme content coming through the social media platforms.

Objectives

- To dissect the content of meme circulated over social media over the span of election
- To see the use of political memes from behavioral perspective by the media consumers in Lok Sabha Election 2019
- To analyze the significance of political memes in political discourse
- To determine the influence of political memes on media consumer

Theoretical Framework

This research work is based upon the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) which explains how persuasion is used as a tool to affect opinions. According to this model, discuss two route of persuasion. One route is persuasion which happen through cognitive way that elaborates what is presented and the second route of persuasion is peripheral route where an argument is formed to persuade a person and his/her opinion is manipulated. In a way we can considered memes as a tool of political discourse that uses the cognitive and the peripheral route to communicate and to influence public opinions. This tool of discourse uses humor and satire as elements for persuasion. (McClure, 2016). Hence, this paper use ELM model as a framework how perception and attitudes formed and changed in different situation.

Limitations

The sample was extracted from Twitter using a specific hashtag. Hence, different social media lead to different political arenas.

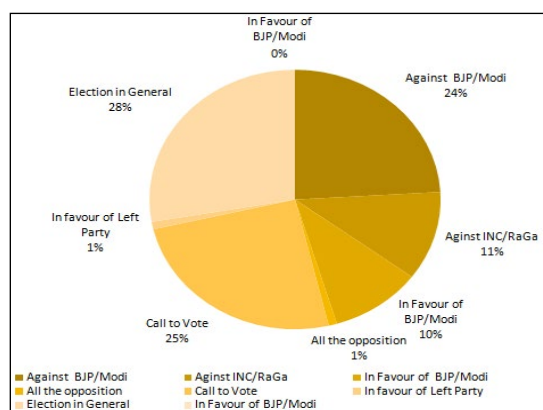


Figure 1. Theme of the Tweets posted using #LokSabhaElection2019



Figure 2. Examples of Some Themed Memes used in Electoral Debate #LokSabhaElection2019, Twitter

Research Method

Mixed methodology is used for the study. The study is completed in two phases. In the first phase of research, an exploratory study using content analysis as the research method. All the sample tweets posted in the micro-blogging

site twitter were retrieved by an advanced twitter search engine using the hashtag #LokSabhaElections2019, given by the election commission of India itself. A total sample of 108 memes were collected which was tweeted by the media consumers using the same hashtag. The tweets included were registered on a database with other additional information such as sender profile, publication time (day/time), number of retweets and number of comments, themes etc. Time period of data collection was from 10th March 2019 (date of election notification by the EClup to the last day of polling which was 19th May, 2019). The images were coded and analyzed according to a set of variable.

The second phase was conducted through online survey using structured questionnaire. Two sets of questionnaire were prepared, one set was for those participant who were active in political discourse. During the study, the researcher identified and went through several facebook pages related to Indian politics and memes. The pages were identified and chosen by using purposive sampling technique. The participants were chosen randomly on the basis of comments and likes given by them on political posts. Questionnaire through facebook messenger was forwarded to find out how much value users attach to memes and how much they are getting influenced and to determine different types of memes circulated during the election. Then, a survey questionnaire especially meant and designed for journalists was forwarded to know their point of view regarding seriousness and significance of memes in today's scenario. A total of 26 journalists belonging to different media houses across the nation submitted their response through google form. Closed ended questions are analyzed through SPSS.

Table 1. Frequency of Memes Posting

Account Holder	Frequency	Percent
Bharatiya Janta Party	7	6.5
Indian National Congress	1	.9
Individual	60	55.6
Fan Page	13	12.0
Press Information Bureau	11	10.2
Election Commission of India	12	11.1
News Channel	2	1.9
Newspaper	2	1.9
Total	108	100.0

Data Interpretation & Analysis

PART A Content Analysis

Theme of the tweets posted using #LokSabhaElection2019 Narendra Modi's blunder with the 'radar' during the Balakot strikes, and later with meditation in Kedarnath

with camera germinated several memes galore. As memes were unregretful to RaGa, likewise these memes were also unapologetic to the prime minister errors over the years. The above table clearly indicates that BJP was the most talked about party in this election. Even if the memes targeted BJP or was in favour. No matter whether the memes circulated contained positive messages or negative, it is safe to say that those memes did not affect BJP's numbers. Since, the result of the 17th Lok Sabha Election declared Modi led BJP govt. win with a majority of 303 seats. However, the above chart indicates that govt. body like ECI & PIB were creative to get out the vote from the voters. The most targeted theme came in this election was to motivate citizen to cast their vote as per the above data.

The 2019 Lok Sabha election followed with the last election's winning tactic of using the social media platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter etc. But this time, a new genre of political discourse entered with serious effort. Along with the use of text, videos and photos, most of the political parties and individuals supporters joined the meme wars, mocking their opposition during the campaigning period. It is clear from the above table that, individuals are the one who had participated in this meme discourse maximum. Interestingly one surprising findings came out. Along with individuals and political parties, this

time the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's Press Information Bureau and Election Commission of India too has chosen meme to send out message to voters to grab their attention. Popular Bollywood and hollywood dialogues like from Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Krrish, Border, Games of Thrones, Avengers: End Game were featured in meme to woo the voters.

Evaluating the cross-tab highlights the facts that among all the political parties and candidates, Modi/BJP was the one who generated more references, more than double of INC/RaGa (N=.37). It is worth mentioning that among the collected contents, BJP is the only party which also gave attention towards voter awareness.

There are various types of memes such as video memes, look-alike (one subject is compared to another or to a fictional character, standing out the physical similarity between both), exploitable (photomontages with overlays), GIFs, Image macro (image & text composition), simple photographs (casual shot, pic of tv broadcasting, nothing written over the image but on the top as a heading). In the #LokSabhaElections2019, handful of the memes were from image macro category and a very few were from only photograph category as shown in Figure 5. The above Tables depicts that few memes in the sample contained typical characteristics of different existing formats of online memes.

Table 2. Most Targeted Theme

Theme of the Tweets* Account Holder Cross-tabulation									
Account Holder									
Theme of the tweets	BJP	INC	Individual	Fan Page	PIB	ECI	News Channel	Newspaper	Total
Against Modi/BJP	0	1	19	3	0	0	1	2	26
Against Rahul/INC	2	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	12
Favour BJP/Modi	1	0	6	4	0	0	0	0	11
All the opposition	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Call to Vote	3	0	6	1	8	8	1	0	27
Favour of Left	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Election in General	1	0	18	4	3	4	0	0	30
Total	7	1	60	13	11	12	2	2	108

Table 3. Typology of the meme

Typology of the Meme* Account Holder Cross-tabulation									
Account Holder									Total
Typology of the meme Image Macro Only Photograph	BJP	INC	Individual	Fan Page	PIB	ECI	News Channel	Newspaper	
	7	1	55	13	11	13	1	2	103
	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	0	5
Total	7	1	59	13	12	13	1	2	108



Figure 3. Sample of Tweets used by ECI & PIB, Twitter 2019



Simple Photograph



Figure 4. Image-Macro

Part B: Poll Survey

The Figure 5, showed that almost every participants has used internet as a source for getting political news. Around 96.3% users has used internet alongside radio and television. Looking at the above data, we can assume that in near future the radio and television is going to be replaced totally by internet, especially by young generation for acquiring information related to politics or any so ever issues. This question was important to know because the more consumers are moving towards digital media, the more is the chances of participation and engagement in political discourse which includes online discussion, post, tweets etc.

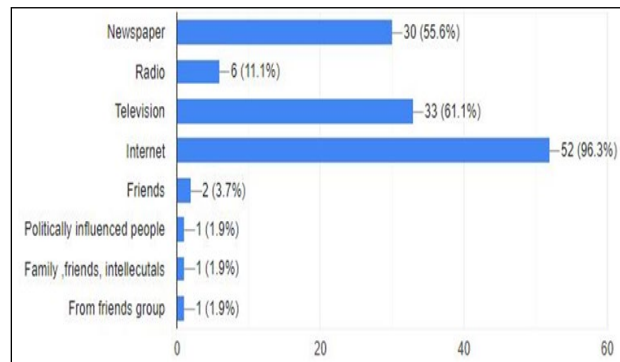


Figure 5. Source of Political News

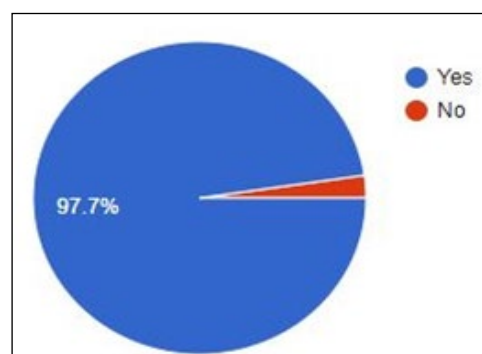


Figure 6. Memes: A Medium of Awareness

The acquired data results (Figure 5), showed that almost 90% of the respondents agreed that many a times they come to know about any political issue/news through sharing of memes by others in the social media. This goes completely in parallel to the result of the above Figure 6, where it is clearly showed that 97.3% of the respondents get political news through internet. But, they do also get to know about issues through memes is quite an interesting revelation. So, it would not be wrong to say that it is via memes that users respond to current sociopolitical events, some of which might not have been widely recognized otherwise.

The column graph makes it very clear that majority of the media users comes from young age group which is 18-28 years old, making up to. Hence, an assumption that youths are more active social media platforms seems to be true here.

Creation of meme doesn't require any high-fi technology nor any specific skills. There are many free soft wares available in the internet such as knowyourmeme, meme generator, meme creator through which one can easily add their content in the template and can create memes. However the result of the study shows that 53.3 % of the media users are engaged in creation or sharing of memes. There is no as such difference. It means there are few active creators and sharers and rest of the users are involved in multiple level of participation in the form of likes and comments because the number of likes and comments received is much higher.



Figure 7. Age of the Media Consumers

Three different groups emerges in the study findings and they exhibits significant difference in their motivation factor behind creation or sharing of memes. Findings revealed that one group sole motivation is entertainment. And respondents who fall into this category are maximum in numbers. They create or share these memes solely for the purpose of fun or entertainment. Second group though considered fun and entertainment as a component but they also accepted a motive of self-expression behind their action of creating or sharing memes. They found it as a way of replying back to their opponents in a funny manner and the third motivation factor emerges out of this study is of exposing others/opponents. Few of the reply to make these three motivation factor much clear are given in Figure 5.

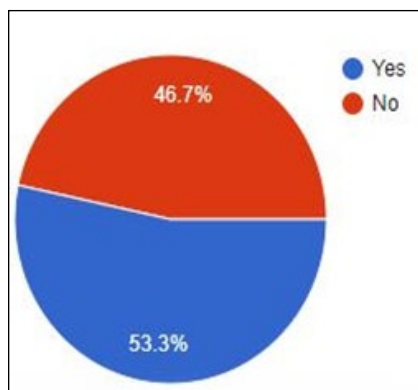


Figure 8. Creation or sharing of Political Memes

Can you Please Define What Meme is?

- The most squazed format of message having a sarcastic tone
- Piece of text, videos etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations
- Meme is a form of expreaaion with good amount of humaor on some serious or light issues
- Meme is the cartoonal fact which tries to define the current sceario of a person an image, video, piece of text is copied and spread rapidly by internet users which makes you laugh

- Sarcastic Videos
- Meme is a kind of humor which is made using random Pictures (may or may not be viral over internet)
- Nowaday it became a new format o online jokes. But a meme is a behaviour that spreads from person to person. It defines someone's reaction too
- A morphed Picture or Photos put together to create fun, laughter
- Some kind of jokes

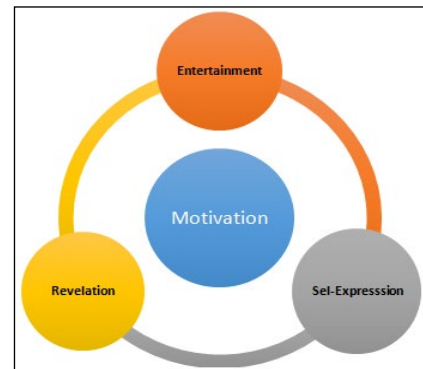


Figure 9. Motivation behind Participation in Meme Discourse

We have seen people creating, sharing, giving reactions on meme. But, do they actually know what meme is, to understand this psychology researcher asked this questions. For a surprise, only 60% of the answer received were nearly substantial enough to accept them as correct. Most of the respondents restricted themselves to joke, sarcasm images and videos. However, all were partially correct in touching the one of the few important components which together makes a meme and that is presence of humor or sarcasm in any morphed or photoshopped images. To quote the best answer is like this "A meme is a virally-transmitted photograph that is embellished with text that pokes fun at a cultural symbol or social or political idea." A few answer good as answer to some extent are "A picture which is created/ morphed by people and shared over social media sites such as Facebook, Whatsapp, hike etc. To troll the celebrities, politicians, sports celebrities etc. Which has a humorous content for audience which has enough potential to manipulate/ influence audience and their views about the person. This can be known as meme" and "piece of text, videos etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations."

Few other answer worth to quotes was something like this a meme is an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person in entertaining manner" and "Meme is an image, video, text which is humorous in nature and shared by internet users rapidly.

One very interesting answer cam among all is something

like this a manipulated information intended to provide misleading information.

To a great extent all the answers are very nearby to what in today's scenario we called as meme.

Impact of Meme

Figure 11, depicts the answer of the respondents. When asked the question that whether the respondents discuss these memes online or offline, 82.4% of the media consumers said that they do discuss memes either offline or online with others. Only 17.6% said they do not. On the similar pattern, journalists too believe that memes can be a tool of political discourse as more than 53% agreed on this and almost 20% seems to be partially agreed.

However when it was asked from the respondents that whether memes influence them in either supporting or opposing any particular issue, party or candidates. Result clearly indicates that nearly 51% of the respondents, despite of its popularity in social media do not give it a serious thought. Surprisingly around 14% said yes they get influenced by memes (Figure 12). Hence, it can be concluded that loaded meme shares do not go much beyond their entertainment.

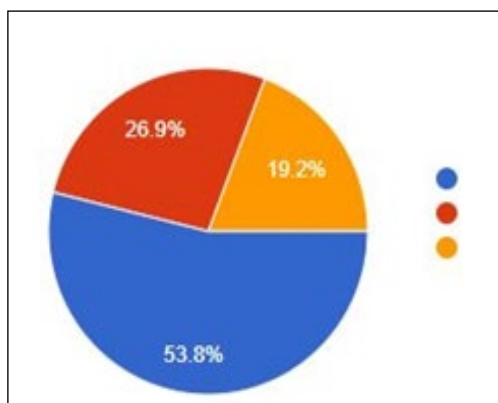


Figure 10. Discussion of Memes with Others, Online or Offline (Respondents')

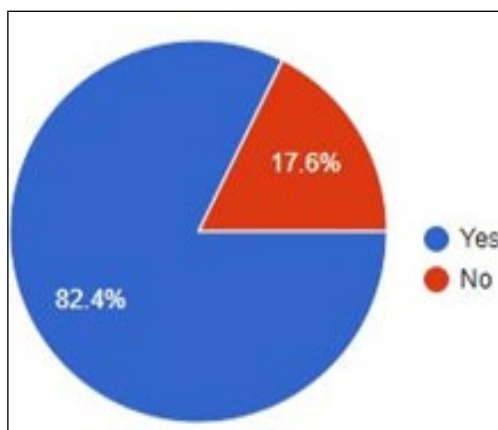


Figure 11. Tool as a Political Discourse (Journalists)

Figure 13, depicts similar point of view journalists also had. Only 3.8% of the journalists believed that political meme/ caricature can persuade a person's vote. However, 53.8% remained neutral on the issue.

Conclusion

From the arrest of a BJP worker Priyanka Sharma in Bengal over posting meme on CM Mamta Banerjee or jibe taken by Rahul Gandhi over Prime Minister. From the use of memes using dialogues from Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Krrish and Border by Press Information Bureau and urging people to vote through them to the use of phrase "Winter is coming" from Game of Thrones by Election Commission of India.

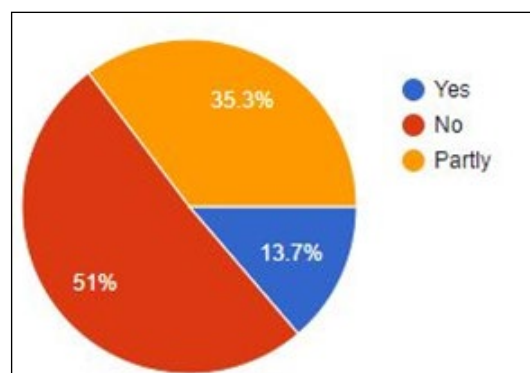


Figure 12. Influence Political Decision

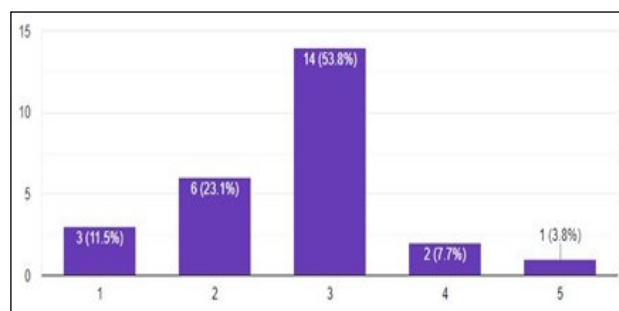


Figure 13

There is no doubt that in Lok Sabha Election 2019, political actors in India has taken memes very seriously. But after analyzing and comparing answers collectively, the study concluded that memes are one of the good thing that's happened to political discourse. Because at some point of time or for a few seconds, their humorous touch makes apolitical people take notice of political happenings. But there is no decisive evidence to suggest that memes directly influence the political choices of the voters. The content analysis data also revealed that even though BJP was in hit list of meme creators, in terms of attacking too, it is safe to say that those memes did not affect BJP's numbers. Since, BJP won an absolute majority in Lok Sabha election 2019 winning 303 seats on its own. The findings concluded that though internet meme helps in communicating political staire but impact on the voters voting decision. Hence, the null hypothesis that Political memes are just satire but does

not have an impact on the audience is accepted. One new aspects of official government accounts came in fore front in this election season is that they became creative to get out the vote from the voters.

Suggestions

Extracted data from a longer duration could have found more classical formats of memes as well as its impacts. Hence, future research can be carried out keeping that in mind.

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