



The Conundrum of Digital Religiosity in Pakistan: A Netnographic Exploration of Internet Memes as Contested Religious Capital

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Abstract

The digitalization and virtual enactment of religious discourses as the text of everyday life in Pakistan has engendered contentious debates in the country. The production and consumption of religious capital via internet memes are a popular genre whose humorous presentation of religion created serious debates about the lived religion in Pakistan. The current blended Netnography explores the role of social media in the portrayal of the memetic context in Pakistan and how various humorous religious contents create contested debates in the country. For this study, in-depth interviews and online participant observation were employed to obtain comprehensive data and deep insights. Online participant observation was carried out on four social media platforms including Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. In-depth interviews were taken from 41 (22 males and 19 females) social media users belonging to varied age groups and diverse sectarian, educational, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds living in Rawalpindi. The findings of the study suggest that the memetic presentation of religious discourses on social media sites is a contested religious capital that is both celebrated and condemned. On the one hand, the comic presentation of religious discourses creates a space for the critical inquiry of religion, as well as offers a space for the spread of radical ideas by those who consider religion to be a sacred entity and oppose treating it in a humorous manner.

Keywords: Digital religiosity, religious capital, social media, internet memes, netnography

1. Introduction

Social media has brought colossal changes to religious identities and how individuals discursively construct and consume religious discourses. Memetic representation has become a trend on social media, and now people easily generate memes on various topics and themes. In the contemporary world, religious content is also represented online in memetic form which brings a shift in traditional religiosity because a variety of religious themes and beliefs are circulated on the internet in humorous form. Religious memes are visual and emotive forms of representation that express religion in a humorous way which is spread quickly in the digital world. Religious-oriented memes provide an interesting form of representation for analysis that, how religious understanding is consumed, produced, and circulated online in a humorous way instead of the sacred form (Bellar et. al., 2013). In this digital age, religious content are now shared in the form of memes, funny videos, posts, pictures, stories, and status for transferring spiritual messages and ideologies on social media. By creating humorous visual representations of religion, free media offers a platform for netizens to make sense of and understand their beliefs. The cycle is then continued by others who copy, interpret, regenerate and share religious memes according to their own beliefs and experiences (Bellar et. al., 2013). This occasionally leads to online controversies based on blasphemy content and religious memes. In the present research, we confer how religious understanding or religious content is shaped, expanded, and circulated online through religious memes. We will take an anthropological approach toward the study of social media and memes as contested religious capital in the age of digital faith. Internet memes are commonly used as a tool to share thoughts and ideas about various subjects in a humorous manner over social media. Digital culture offers a dynamic space within which people generate memes as cultural objects. After Mike Godwin, the creator of "Godwin's Law," used the term "meme" in relation to the internet in an article published in *Wired* in 1994, the concept of online memes gained prominence. Over time, the term "meme" has come to mean something significantly different and considerably more specific, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations" (Mick, 2019).

Mememes are of different types such as religious, controversial, informative, and political, etc. Social media memes about religion can be described as religious memes circulated on digital platforms whose texts reflect a variety of religious themes. Religious memes can be used both, to critique and motivate religious ideas and identities, and the interpretation is dependent upon the medium in which the meme is uploaded. Religious memes depict an expression of lived religion, such as memetic communication and meaning-making generated by netizens' creativity, preferences, and connections. Social media provides a platform in which netizens can make sense of their beliefs by creating visual expressions of their religious content in a humorous way. Religious memes as language and visual representations of both a sacred and secular nature are accrued online, transformed, and reshaped by people to create expressions of the religions. Religious memes can be used to support religious identities and beliefs in lively ways, as tools of critique, and to highlight popular debates about religion (Bellar et. al., 2013).

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Religious memes on social media are not just expressions of beliefs, sometimes they work as propaganda against religion. Religious memes in virtual space are also considered as a tool to not only target but also to make fun of other religions and sects which may generate fake knowledge about other religions. It can be clearly examined all over the globe that many memes generate on Muslim women's *Hijab* (Muslim women outfit that reflects her modesty and privacy) aiming not only to make fun of Islamic values but also to criticize Muslims, calling them conservative and patriarchist. Woman in *Hijab* is negatively stereotyped in internet memes which depicts Muslim women as weak, submissive, burdened, and abused (Ibrahim, 2019). Therefore, sometimes religious memes become controversial because this memetic communication hurts the emotions of believers.

In Pakistan, a transition occurs regarding religious content on social media e.g. from serious to humor debate. Before the emergence of social media, religious debates and religious content were considered sacred instead of treated humorously however, the situation has changed drastically in the last few years with the new trends developing in the digital world (Aguilar et. al., 2017). In the present world, religious scholars also changed their way of conveying religious knowledge or debating about religion. For example, now many *Molanas* (religious scholars) such as *Molana Tariq Masood*, and *Molana Nasir Madani* address religious debates in a funny way to teach people. The statements of these religious scholars get viral on social media. Also, netizens in Pakistan make memes of religious scholars of other sects to make fun of them and attack other sects' beliefs.

Hence, in the light of preceding discussion, this research is a detailed study of how religious identities are being constructed through social media and how religious content used as a humor element construct contested discourses on social media in the form of memes.

The research can be seen in the light of the 'Mediation of meaning' theory. The mediation of meaning theory was introduced by Professor Stewart M. Hoover in 2006. The theory suggests that media communication helps people to articulate, explain, and represent the religious beliefs and religious meaning within a culture. This shows media offer believers and religious groups a language that they can use to communicate with others and themselves. Similarly, media is an important platform where people negotiate and express religious beliefs and identity. Hoover argues that the 'mediation of meaning' framework sees people as active consumers and interpreters of media content, and he explains that they consume by making the connections or contrasts between the messages portrayed and their own beliefs (Hoover, 2006).

In the same way, new media technologies enable netizens to create and interpret religious content and communicate their beliefs to a broader public. Similarly, social media offers an active cultural space in which netizens generate cultural objects such as memes that can be created, interpreted, and regenerated. Considering the mediation of meaning theory, we can see those religious memes as a tool of communication that can be used to affirm religious beliefs and highlight popular debates and assumptions about religion. Religious memes are visual and emotive forms of online communication with deeper cultural meanings as internet memes about religion convey religious messages and also spread stereotypes about religion (Aguilar et. al., 2017). 'Mediation of meaning' theory explains the meaning-making process and how digital communication helps believers to articulate, interpret and regenerate religious messages. In light of the above discussion, this research is an anthropological exploration of how digital faith brings a shift in traditional religiosity and how religion is portrayed in a variety of memetic contexts constructing contested religious discourses.

2. Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to conduct the present study in order to obtain the in-depth detail of digital faith and the role of social media in making humorous content as a contested religious capital. In order to explore the phenomenon, a blended netnography is conducted for this research including face-to-face interaction (in-depth interviews are conducted among people of Gulistan Colony Rawalpindi) and online participant observation (participant observation is conducted online on Facebook, Tiktok, YouTube, and Instagram platforms) to obtain detailed data and perspectives about the research topic. A blended netnography is described as the combination of both ethnography and netnography methods, including data collected online as well as by face-to-face interactions (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography (Digital Ethnography) is a qualitative research method of conducting ethnography in the digital space (Kozinets, 2015). Fisher and Smith (2011), viewed netnography as one of the interpretive research methods that provide thick descriptions of social meaning when conducting research in digital space.

As part of netnography, online participant observation was conducted in virtual spaces by being a part of online communities on social media platforms i.e., Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. Religious groups and pages on Facebook were joined and religious accounts on Tiktok, YouTube, and Instagram were subscribed. Similarly, the accounts of religious scholars were followed. During the fieldwork, approximately 8 hours were spent daily on these online platforms checking religious groups/pages and also taking part in religious conversation through commenting and posting. For data collection, screenshots of religious memes, posts, and videos and as well as comments on these posts and videos were taken.

Moreover, in-depth interviews were conducted in Gulistan Colony Rawalpindi, Pakistan which allowed to deeply explore the respondents' perspectives on a research topic (Guion, Diehl, and McDonald, 2011). For conducting interviews, an interview guide was constructed to explore the objectives of the research. In-depth interview guides

are based on the themes, issues, and research questions (Boyce, and Neale, 2006). The interview guide was constructed based on the main research questions and by consulting the relevant literature review. A pilot study was conducted to test the suitability and reliability of the interview guide before the actual fieldwork and necessary changes were incorporated.

The purposive sampling technique is employed for to recruit participants who can offer in-depth information about the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample consists of social media users belonging to varied age-group (18 to 58 years old) and diverse socio-economic, sectarian and educational backgrounds. The sample size was forty-one consisting of 22 male and 19 female respondents. The interviews were conducted in bilingual i.e. Urdu and English languages as per the respondents' preference. The interview time range was from 30 to 45 minutes and the interviews are taken to the point of saturation which is a point when the variation in the qualitative data is leveling off, and the researcher is assured that new perspectives and explanations are no longer coming from the data (Saunders et. al., 2018).

After the completion of fieldwork, initial codes were generated in which phrases, sentences, and examples were isolated by labeling them with meaningful topics. Correspondingly, there were clusters of codes and from those clusters, the codes were gathered which have the same meaning and initial themes were given to them. In addition, the initial themes were reviewed and formed into defined themes (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). For this research, two types of analysis techniques i.e. thematic analysis and textual analysis were applied to the gathered data. The thematic analysis provides the researcher with a precise interpretation of what it is and how it is carried out maintaining the 'flexibility' knot to its epistemological position (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the textual analysis, this study analyzed the caption, words, symbols, language, and other cultural products. Social media content is taken from Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Tiktok which includes religious memes, posts, videos, comments, and hashtags. The textual analysis was embedded in the thematic analysis to create a link between the two types of analysis and the following themes were generated.

Research ethics were also observed while conducting interviews for the research. Informed consent was taken from the participants prior to conducting interviews and the privacy of participants was ensured by hiding the identity of respondents (Sanjari et. al, 2014). User names of the social media groups/pages or accounts have been kept confidential by hiding them from plates to maintain privacy.

3. Memetic Representation of Religious Content

Memes as part of current digital culture have become more prevalent with the upsurge of social media as many people express themselves using humor on online platforms. Memes also communicate religious beliefs that circulate popular debate about religion in the digital world. Memes about religion function in the communicative language of participatory culture and reflect the trend toward lived religion in the digital space. Religious memes sometimes spread stereotypes about other religions. Religious memes are used as a tool to target other sects/religions, and many authoritative figures use religious memes to influence other people's mindsets. This describes that religious memes can be used to affirm religious beliefs and identities in lively ways as a tool of critique and to highlight popular debates about religion.

In Pakistan, religion has been considered sacred and its teachings are conveyed to the people in a respectable manner. For example, if someone recites a verse of the Quran then it is conveyed to the people without music or animation because it is sacred. However, respectable perspective is changing today as people are conveying religious messages with musical backgrounds or with animation. Digital representation of religious content can challenge dominant discourses about religion and this also change the traditional boundaries regarding religious content by mixing the sacred and entertainment element (Bellar et. al., 2013). While discussing a change in religious content representation, one of the respondents named Muhammad Habib, a 30-years-old man who belongs to the *Sunni* sect said:

I think there is a change, firstly religion is considered sacred, but now people made memes on it and people liking or sharing religious memes shows that they accept this change with time.

He further describes that people accept this transition to some extent, and they become more flexible about religion. He claims that if people are not accepting this change, then they get the tag like '*ime bhi pendu na bno*' (Don't be so backward and conservative). Similarly, many other participants also illustrate that there is a change from sacred to humor element regarding religious content. Religious content on social media shifting from serious to amusing messages, in other words, the spiritual aesthetic has evolved into the memetic context (Aguilar et. al., 2017). In the same way, as shown in the following Plate 01 people accept religious content as a humor element and they also encourage the person who



Plate 01: Picture of comments on YouTube video.

edits the video clips of the religious sermon and makes religious memes. In Plate 01, the comment 'that girl is

amazing' reflects that people also appreciate the person who made a dub mash video⁴ of a *Molvi*⁵. The study demonstrates that social media users also appreciate humorous content by subscribing/following their channel or account and also support them by sharing their memes which depicts that people take it as fun. In the same context, one of the respondents named Nadeem Javaid 36-years-old man who belongs to the *Sunni* sect asserted:

There are many different reasons why people make or share religious memes. Some people make religious memes to spread religious knowledge, and some people share such posts and videos just for fun.

Correspondingly, the study claims that now Islamic content is used as a humor element on social media. For example, there are videos in which people make fun of '*Naat*'⁶. On YouTube, there was a video of a *Molvi* who changed the *Naat* lyrics '*Ya Allah main bhi roza rkho ga*' (Oh God I will fast too) into Humor content '*Ya Allah Main Bhi Saadi Krun Ga*' (Oh God I will get married too). Some people criticized and asserted that people upload non-religious content with a *naat* caption only to get more views. However, the content that portrays is not considered *naat* because their poetry does not praise the Last Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) which is a prerequisite for any lyrics to be called *naat*. Therefore, some people criticize that they changed the lyrics of *naat* in humorous content because they want to increase their followers, viewership, and to get more likes on their posts. On the other hand, some people do not criticize this type of poetry and take it as a source of entertainment. People shared the video with their friends/family and made memes on these funny versions of *naat*, which shows that netizens regenerate the religious content in the memetic form. This circulation also depicts the change in people's behaviors regarding religious memes illustrating that people accept religious content in humor form. Religious memes are circulated in cyberspace in the form of images, videos, and text emphasis on a variety of religious traditions (Shifman, 2012). In a similar context, one of the respondents named Khadija Mustafa, a 23-years-old woman who belongs to the *Sunni* sect elaborated:

Now people edit the statements of religious sermons and make memes on them, and this editing is spreading completely different from the real message of the sermons. For example, people edited Mufti Maki's sermon on marital relations and made memes on it.

Similarly, some respondents also assert that since the advent of memes, people have become less serious about religion and its sensitivity. Similarly, many respondents claim that edited videos of sermons convey messages that are different from the whole discussion in sermons. In this context, another respondent named Muhammad Hanan, a 28-years-old man who belongs to *Sunni* Sect said:

Many times, when a scholar says something funny, it becomes viral for example '*Aya re Ghauri phir*' (here comes the missile) is a statement by Khadim Rizvi⁷ that got viral on social media.

He further illustrated that when people grabbed *Molana's* words and made memes on him, some people started defending him saying that 'this is not his entire lecture, and it is an edited clip of the religious scholar's video.' The religious meme is a new way to present and convey messages and stereotypes about religion online (Aguilar et. al., 2017). In the same way, another respondent named Hamna Umer, a 35-years-old woman who belongs to the *Shia* sect said:

People make dubbed mesh of religious scholars like a 'TikToker' Maheen who dubs the video of Molana Nasir Madani.

Similarly, many other respondents claim that now people make fun of religious scholars through dub mash and also through editing their sermons' videos. They illustrate that now religious content gets easily viral because of its portrayal in a memetic context. This shows that people's behaviors have changed now because they highlight and express the religious sensitive messages in a lighter style of memetic representation. Internet memes about religion highlight the social trend toward lived religion in a particular culture (Campbell, 2012). This explains that the technological access to the memetic form offers a new venue for religious messaging in the digital sphere (Haden and Feller, 2020).

These Plates are screenshots of comments on the videos in which people edited the clips of religious scholars' sermons. These comments show that some people criticize these religious memes by saying 'Do not make fun of religion.' Plate 02 demonstrates that people said that 'Do not make fun of *Allah-Ho-Akbar* (Allah is greater)' because this phrase is used for praising God. Another comment on the same video from religious scholar *Molana Tariq Masood* said that 'Stupid! shame on you, you are enjoying making fun of religious scholars.' As Plate 03 depicts that 'May God curse on those who made mimicking videos of religious scholars,' and another comment on the same video is that 'Shame on you for making such a video.' Plate 04 shows a comment in which a person recalls the quote of the Last Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) 'Respect the religious scholars' and lamenting them for ignoring teachings of the Last Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) despite of being a Muslim. The preceding comment from a netizen demonstrates that religious memes hurt people's emotions, and as a result, they respond

⁴ <https://youtu.be/Yji72PsZOUo>

⁵ In Pakistan, *Molvi* is a term used for religious scholars as well as for those who have a beard and pray five-time or strictly follow the Islamic teachings.

⁶ A *Naat* is a poetry that specifically praises the Last Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and is considered very sacred text for Muslims.

⁷ Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi was the founder of Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP), a political-religious party created in 2015, that is known to protest against the changes to Pakistan's blasphemy law.

harshly, which in turn spreads hatred.



Plate 02: Picture of comment section on a TikTok video.



Plate 03: Picture of the comment section on a YouTube video.

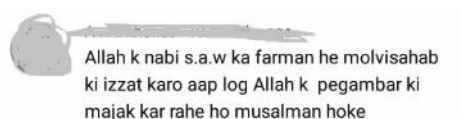


Plate 04: Picture of comment section on a YouTube video.

There are hashtags such as #report, #ban, and #block used to protest against people who make religious content as humor causing a change in traditional religiosity. In the above pictures, it is depicted that people raise their voices against the video that makes fun of *Allah-Ho-Akbar* and against those who make funny videos of religious scholars. In the same context, one of the respondents named Muhammad Fadi 37-years-old man who belongs to the *Sunni* sect proclaimed:

I am not in favor of religious memes because I think that there should be no fun or joke associated with religion or religious personalities.

He further argues that there is no need to make religious memes because religion is a serious topic, and our emotions are attached to it. He claims people themselves do not know what they are doing, if non-Muslims make memes on Islamic values, then we label them '*ghustakh*' (blasphemous), and we do not accept it. On the other hand, we represent our religious beliefs funnily as some memes are targeting directly *Molana* and make fun of religion. He stresses that Muslims must avoid making fun of their own religion. Similarly, one of the respondents named Sabiha Aslam 25-years-old woman who belongs to the *Sunni* sect stated:

Religious content is used as a humor element on social media because of immaturity and also due to a lack of religious awareness and religious knowledge.

She further illustrates that because of the influence of Western culture, we take religion as fun, not as sacred. In the same spirit, some respondents also argue that meme culture should be banned because religion is not fun, it is an extremely sensitive issue and there should be limitations on the matter of religion. Religious memes use humor to frame religious beliefs and express religious meanings in challenging ways that promote bias toward particular groups (Aguilar et. al., 2017). Contrary to this, some respondents claim that if religious content is sending a good message without background music, then it is good and it is acceptable.

Based on these findings, it can be asserted that religious content in the memetic form gets easily viral among people. It is perceived that spreading religious knowledge through memes is very effective because people particularly youngsters learn religion with fun. This describes that there is a change in people's behavior regarding religious content because now people easily convert religious content into humor elements. Many people make funny videos of religious scholars and edit their sermons videos which brings a transition from sacred to humor element. Through respondents' views and participant observation, we illustrate that there are two types of reactions regarding religious memes. Most elders criticize that religion is a serious and sensitive matter and it is not acceptable making fun of religion. On the other hand, some youngsters enjoy the memetic representation of religion and claim that if religious memes spread authentic and good messages without musical background then it is acceptable.

4. Religious Scholars and Internet Memes

In the digital world, religious scholars use modern technology to create social network sites and apps for religious purposes that are based on various spiritual themes. They use the social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, etc. for the promotion of their religious beliefs (Verschoor-Kirss, 2012). In the

Pakistani context, Muslim religious scholars also use social media for promoting religious knowledge, such as *Molana Tariq Jameel*, Dr. Zakir Naik, *Molana Ali*, *Mufti Menk*, *Molana Tariq Masood*, *Molana Nasir Madani*, and Dr. Farhat Hashmi, etc. They all strive to reach out to today's youth and propagate Islamic doctrine because they consider it as a pressing need. Religious scholars have changed their way of presenting Islam on social media by using humorous language to captivate today's younger audience (Sule and Abdulkareem, 2020). For example, *Molana Tariq Masood* and *Molana Nasir Madani* spread religious knowledge in a very humorous way. In the same context, one of the respondents named Madiha Faisal 35-years-old woman who belongs to the *Shia* sect argued:

Everything is changing with time. In the same way, our religious scholars have changed their teaching styles. Traditionally, people go to mosques or meet scholars to solve their religious problems and scholars were only available in mosques. Now there is increased access due to their availability on various social media platforms.

Correspondingly, social media has become a major platform with time and as a result, Islamic scholars also start learning the language of social media because it is the demand of time (Cheong, 2014). In the same context, another respondent named Muhammad Habib, a 30-years-old man who belongs to the *Sunni* sect said:

Religious scholars now use English words in their lectures that today's generation can understand easily. For example, Nasir Madni's statement 'Baby I am in a masjid (Mosque)' gets viral and people make funny videos of this sentence.

He further elaborated that sometimes, religious scholars' humorous way becomes offensive because they talk about taboo or serious topics in a funny way which is not good because as a religious scholar, you are presenting the image of your religion. Correspondingly, some respondents also illustrate that religious scholars also play a role in making religious content a humorous element using funny words, phrases, and jokes. Many respondents illustrate that the humorous communication of religious messages is not acceptable as religion is a serious matter for people. Moreover, religious scholars have official social media accounts with their names. For gaining the attention of people, religious scholars spread religious knowledge and amusingly address serious issues. It is believed that Muslim scholars changed their way of communication and interaction on social media which enable them to spread the teachings of Islam effectively to their believers (Sule and Abdulkareem, 2020).

This image is the screenshot taken from YouTube video⁸ in which netizens gather funny clips from different *Molana's* sermon videos. In the video, *Molana* discusses the story of his second marriage and also narrates a funny story of a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship. The title of the video seems humorous as shown in Plates 05 titled '*Mufti Sahab* killing it.' The title reflects the role of religious scholars in making religious content as humor because these are not edited videos and users just gather the funny clips of *Molana* in which he conveys religious messages or addresses the serious or taboo topic funnily. In this context, another respondent named Sabiha Aslam 25-years-old woman who belongs to the *Sunni* sect said:

There are religious scholars like Nasir Madni and Tariq Massod who make funny statements. When they do so, I do not think they need to be called *Molvi*. They must first correct themselves and then teach others. Similarly, some respondents do not accept this change because in their views 'religion is a sacred thing and we should not make fun of religion'. When religious content in a humorous way embraces people's beliefs and culture, then they may tend to move from orthodoxy to heterodoxy. Heterodoxy refers to views or beliefs that come into contradiction with an orthodox position of a specific religious community. They involve beliefs that move away from what is considered to be sacred to religious doctrine and toward what is refers as disrespectful (Aguilar et. al., 2017).



Plate 05: Picture taken from YouTube Video.



Plate 06: Picture of comments on TikTok video.

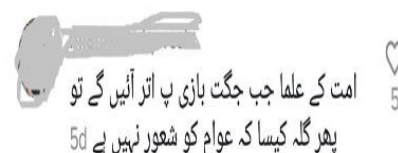


Plate 07: Picture of comments on TikTok video.

These images depict people's reactions to religious memes that result in online controversies about the

⁸ <https://youtu.be/ADZ-2Kc9HY>

representation of religious content in a memetic form. Some people give a very harsh reaction and raise their voices proclaiming ‘Do not make fun of religion’. They also start online campaigns/protests to stop these hurting practices, using different hashtags such as #reportthisaccount, #blockthisaccount, and #respectreligiousclerics to prohibit these practices on a different online platform. When people see *Molana* playing a role in making religious content as humor, they question his religious status ‘from where he seems a *Molana*,’ because they do not consider such behavior suitable for a religious person. As these plates (06 and 07) show that some people use abusive or sarcastic language such as ‘*Maskhrah*’ (entertainer), ‘*Jugat Baz*’ (comedian), and ‘*Marasi*’ (musician) for these religious scholars because of their way of conveying religious messages challenge the traditional boundary between sacred and entertainment element. Some people also criticize the humorous behavior of religious scholars by saying that they are doing it just for fame as they are running their channels, so they talk entertainingly just for more and more views and subscribers.

In addition, the study claims that some people challenge the discursive categorization of *Molvi* in Islam. As in Islam, music, and dance is Haram (not allowed) however, in today’s world, some *Molv*is make TikTok videos and memes in which they dance or sing songs.



Plate 08: Picture of comments on TikTok video.



Plate 09: Picture of comments on TikTok video.

These images show that people hit the discursive categorization of *Molvi*, and this change leads to many online controversies. For example, a famous TikToker who makes funny videos and is criticized by people because ‘he is a *Molvi*’. Many people criticize TikToker saying ‘*yhi kaam karna tha tu dhari kyun rakhi* (if this is what you want to do, then why do you have a beard on your face), and ‘*Molvi kuch to sharam kro*’ (shame on you *Molvi*). There are two more *Molv*is who become TikTokers and make funny videos. They also have many followers and face criticism. As Plate 08 and 09 reflect that people criticize them saying: ‘*Ulama karaam ka naaam badnam kr rhy ho sharam kro*’ (Shame on you for defaming the name of religious scholars), and ‘*Molvi leave TikTok*.’ When they use filters in videos and wear ‘*dupata*’ (shawl for women) and dress up like ‘*Zanani*’ (woman) in their videos. These *Molv*is make funny videos on husband/wife relationships in which they apply makeup for presenting themselves as a woman, and also share beauty tips in their videos. Therefore, peoples start calling them ‘Digital *Molvi*’, ‘*Khusra*’ (transgender), and ‘*Molviyun ki Nargis*’ (Nargis was a stage dancer) thus labeling them with her name reflects that they are considered less respectful. Moreover, some people in the comment section threaten them and says that ‘Wherever I found you then I will kill you,’ which reflects the hatred resulting from such religious controversial content portrayed on social media.

Contrary to this, some respondents take this memetic portrayal of religious content positively and, in their views, there is nothing wrong if religious content is converted into a humorous element. Some people enjoy their videos and appreciate them by saying ‘*zabardast*’ (great), ‘Hahahaha very nice,’ ‘*Molvi* you are awesome,’ and ‘This guy is amazing.’ This illustrates that religious memes can employ allusion that may either affirm religious authority or represents a departure from traditional framings of religious authority (Bellar et. al., 2013). Similarly, some respondents also claim that if religious content as a memetic form plays a positive role in spreading religious knowledge, then this change is fruitful. Religious memes present a unique informative structure that addresses and presents specific understandings of religion (Aguilar et. al., 2017). In the same way, the study asserts that there is an acceptance in people regarding religious memes because religious memes also play an effective role in transferring religious knowledge. Memes about religion offer an important medium for understanding religious messages which express key values about religion (Bellar et. al., 2013).

5. Religious Memes as a Communication Tool

Internet memes are a new form of communication on social media as religious memes are highly visual and emotive forms of online communication with hidden messages to communicate. Internet memes about religion are an expression of culture that enables netizens to present and take part in a forceful spiritual meaning-making process online that represents a form of lived religion. Religious memes play a unique role in digital culture, by

providing ways to create or share brief visual articulations of their beliefs about religion. Memes other than humor purpose also allow to talk about taboo topics. In the same context, one of the respondents named Muhammad Habib 30-year-old man who belongs to the Sunni sect argues that in this digital world, it is a good way to communicate your message, idea, or belief through memes in a polite way. This communication is also a demand of this era because memes become viral so quickly and you can also communicate your message easily in this way. Similarly, the majority of the respondents claim that religious memes did not just spread humor but they also convey serious messages. Internet memes about religion play a role as visual communication tools that can be easily circulated online (Campbell et. al., 2018).

This image depicts that religious memes play an effective role in promoting religious knowledge. Plate 10 motivates other Muslims that ‘they should never leave their prayers in any circumstances.’ The image displayed in this Plate is one of the most viral pictures on the internet which is also used in many memetic communications. Similarly, there are many memes made through animation characters such as Tom (cartoon character) performing *namaz* (prayer) in a picture with the caption prayer is key to success. Thus, through this memetic communication, they spread the importance of *namaz*. This shows that religious memes play an effective role in spreading religious information. Therefore, memes also provide a medium in which the user can communicate the message of their religion (Campbell et. al., 2018). In the same context, one of the respondents named Nadeem Javaid 36-years-old man who belongs to the Sunni sect claimed:

On social media, many religious memes are playing a positive role by spreading religious knowledge.

Similarly, some other respondents also claim that religious memes play a positive role in conveying beliefs and religious knowledge to the world. Religion memes can convey deep religious messages or information and represent religious identity (Aguilar et. al., 2017). Bellar et al (2013) also describe that internet memes about religion are used to present certain messages about religion.

The following Plates (11 and 12) convey how we experience, practice, express, and understand religion and what religion means to people. These images describe how we practice our religion in the Holy month of *Ramadan* (Fasting Month for Muslims) and people make fun of those Muslims who only practice prayers during Ramadan. Accordingly, plate 11 reflects criticism of *Mosami* (Seasonal) *Namazi* (a term used for the people who do not offer prayer daily but only practice their religion properly in the month of Ramadan). Plate 12 depicts that through memes, people symbolically criticized the discrepancy in the appearance of Muslims during *Ramadan* and the whole year.



Plate 11: Picture taken from Instagram platform.



Plate 10: Picture randomly taken from Facebook platform.



Plate 12: Picture taken from Instagram platform.

In the same context, one of the respondents named Hamna Umer 35-years-old woman who belongs to the Shia Sect shared her views:

Many religious memes are depicting how we practice our religions. For example, a meme got viral on social media during Ramadan in which a boy sleeps throughout the day during Ramadan, but as his father comes home, he gets up and wears a cap to show his father that he has performed his prayer.

Correspondingly, some respondents also claim that religious memes are depicting the way we are practicing our religion. Social media memes communicate and promote specific understandings of lived religion in digital culture. Bellar et al (2013) describe that memes can be analyzed as a product of culture and lived religion, the process by which people through everyday experiences practice religion. The study also asserts that sometimes religious memes are used to target another religion or sect. In this context, one of the respondents named Muhammad Saad 35-years-old man who belongs to the *Sunni* sect asserted:

Religious memes spread more negativity than positivity as they are just an agenda to attack any religion or sect or are used to defame the belief of a person.

Another respondent named Daim Ali 24-year-old man who belongs to the *Sunni* sect narrated his viewpoint that religious memes are used as a tool to attack other religions, just as many non-Muslims use religious memes as propaganda against Muslim women's veils. Correspondingly, a few respondents mentioned that there are many Muslims who also use digital platforms to make fun of other religions attacking their religious beliefs as they make memes on Hindu beliefs. The meaning of a meme can be problematic if created by an outsider, they can be used to criticize a religious group or community (Campbell and Evolvi, 2020).



Plate 13: Picture of comments on YouTube video.



Plate 14: Picture was taken from YouTube video.

These images depict that people also use religious memes as a tool to attack the belief of other sects making fun of their ideas and scholars. A YouTube channel in which the creator is making fun of *Deobandi* religious scholars. Plate 13 is a picture taken from a funny video in which people make memes on *Molana Tariq Jameel*. Plate 14 depicts that people who are saying 'Molana Tariq Jameel is a top Pakistani actor'. Thus, conflicts through religious memes are spreading sectarianism because memetic communication in such cases is used against other sects on social media (Campbell and Evolvi, 2020). In the same context, one of the respondents named Madiha Faisal 35-years-old woman who belongs to the *Shia* sect said:

A lot of memes were made about the religious scholar who belongs to the Shia sect. For example, people who were from the Sunni sect made memes on Allama Syed Zameer Akhtar known as London Jeffery.

Contrary to this view, one of the respondents named 23-years-old woman Khadija Mustafa who belongs to the *Sunni* sect proclaimed:

Many religious memes were made on different sects but most memes are made by non-Muslims to create conflict between different Muslim sects.

She further illustrates that Muslims from different sects are attacking each other through memes but there is a third power that is creating misunderstanding and conflicts between Muslim sects. She believes that non-Muslims play a critical role in creating conflicts between different sects of Islam and promote sectarianism online because they run online pages/accounts with Muslim identities.

6. Conclusion

The memetic enactment of religious discourses is offering a space for criticizing specific religious ideas while on the other hand creating a conflicting situation as there is also a resistance against presenting the sacred in a humorous way. The shift from serious to comedic religious content is also viewed as a way to criticize other religions and sects that outrage the religious sensitivities of other religious communities, igniting discussions and serving as catalysts for the growth in religious animosity and hostility. There are also campaigns against religious memes, claiming that doing so is a plot against Islam that incites religious blasphemy. It is also asserted that the creation of religious memes occurs primarily for financial benefit, disregarding the sanctity of religion. Concomitantly, a significant portion of young people express their support for the memetic presentation of religion, contending that such memes do not disparage religion but rather seek to expose the exploitation of religious concepts. Religious memes are said to be intended to be enjoyed rather than taken seriously as religious matters. The representation of religion in memes in Pakistan is still controversial because it has drawn both support and criticism. Regardless of the contestation, the generation and consumption of memes continue to be a vibrant genre of Pakistan's virtual life.

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