



Humor and Resistance in Pakistani Corporate Memes

Aneeqa Ahmad¹ & Musarrat Azher²

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received:

August 25, 2024

Accepted:

December 23, 2025

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest:

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest and falsification/fabrication of data with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

This study aims at investigating how humor is constructed in corporate memes through cognitive mechanisms and how corporate memes are used as a collective voice by Pakistani employees to express discontent with their work culture and organizational practices. Based on Conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier, & Turner, 2002), this research paper analyzes Pakistani corporate memes selected from widely used platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and Pinterest. Drawing upon Bakhtin's conception of Carnavalesque (Bakhtin, 1984), the significance of workplace humor in challenging dominant narratives, questioning power imbalance and facilitating collective acknowledgement has been highlighted. The findings suggest that the dynamic cognitive processes are responsible for the successful interpretation of humor within corporate memes, depending upon integration of distinct mental spaces evoked by exposure to various ideas present in targeted memes. Further, it is revealed that the workplace memes have the potential to express critique and assert new perspectives by employing techniques such as grotesque exaggeration, visual metaphor, imagery, hyperbole and sarcasm. This article contributes to new debates on internet memes and their potential to galvanize action within digital realm.

Keywords: *conceptual blending; corporate memes; humor; carnivalesque; resistance*

¹ MPhil Scholar, Department of English, University of Sargodha, Sargodha She may be accessed at ahmadaneeqa3@gmail.com

² A Fulbright Alumna, currently working as a professor at Government Sadiq College for Women University, Bahawalpur, Pakistan. She may be accessed at musarratazher@gmail.com



Introduction

With the advent of social media, people are constantly shifting their attention to various online platforms, resulting in almost 62.6 percent of world population being active on social media today as reported on Statista (2024). That is why meme culture is becoming the most common and pervasive phenomenon on internet. Memes are usually text-image combination, also known as image macros that stand out as one of the most ubiquitous form of multimodal discourses on internet nowadays. There are many social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and WhatsApp through which memes spread across mass populations. Diaz (2013, p. 97) has formalized and characterized the concept of Internet meme as: “a unit of information (idea, concept or belief), which replicates by passing on via Internet (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the shape of a hyper-link, video, image, or phrase. It can be passed on as an exact copy or can change and evolve. The mutation on the replication can be by meaning, keeping the structure of the meme or vice versa. The mutation occurs by chance, addition or parody, and its form is not relevant” (Diaz, 2013). Unlike previous studies on workplace humor, corporate memes are chosen for this study due to their fidelity (can be copied and transmitted without significant changes in format or shape), fecundity (a high rate of copying and transmitting across mass population) and longevity (the meme’s potential to survive within a chained spread process) as suggested by Dawkins (Yus, 2023, p. 248). Memes produce humorous effect and resonate with diverse audiences with the help of shared beliefs, knowledge, common experiences, current events and cultural references by employing different devices including play of words/pun, wit, visual metaphor, personification, metonymy, irony, satire and many more. In the early study of humor, the reasons behind usage of humor have largely been neglected in favor of the reasons underlying laughter. Yet, the idea that humor has motivations behind it is a major step in making humor a social rather than just a psychological phenomenon (Francis, 1994). Hence, it can be inferred that Memes do not only serve as medium of entertainment and fun; they can also resist social norms, challenge existing narratives, impugn social conventions, and create new perspectives through humorous combinations, incongruities, and exaggerations. As Holmes (2000) claims, “In work contexts, humor can be utilized by subordinates as a subtle (or not so subtle) license to challenge the power structure, as well as by those in power to achieve the speaker’s goal while apparently de-emphasizing the power differential” (Attardo, 2015, p. 176). Humor plays vital role in lubricating conversations, facilitating interactions at work, sustaining solidarity and professional identity, subverting power dynamics, and developing new ideas.

There are, of course, several studies on workplace humor to investigate the usefulness of humor in leadership and work settings during spoken interactions and

online communication to achieve certain organizational outcomes such as, team performance, group cohesiveness, role of humor during organizational change, citizenship behaviors, and leadership effectiveness (Holmes & Marra, 2006; Mao et al., 2017; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Vetter & Gockel, 2016; Tremblay & Gibson, 2016). The leaders can use humor as strategic tool to navigate challenging situations and motivate employees to perform well by understanding its diverse functions in workplace context. The effective use of humor in workplace can contribute to improved organizational performance, better team management and enhanced employee engagement (Holmes & Marra, 2006). However, much of this concentrates on positive effect of workplace humor in leadership and team management, rather than its use as medium of resistance. There is scarcity of research on workplace memes within Pakistani context to shed light on humor as strategy to deflate status differentiation, medium to challenge management and form subculture, and tool to invert norms without causing aggression (Plester & Orams, 2008; Heiss & Carmack, 2011, as cited in Mak et al., 2012). The present study illustrates two facets: first the interpretation of corporate memes from cognitive-linguistic standpoint to unmask humor behind them and second its role as resisting tool to help employees express criticism where overt and direct criticism is not encouraged. Two researchers while examining workplace humor and resistance in Brazilian telecommunication companies suggested that employees may try to camouflage and express their dissatisfaction with work environment and culture through employment of humor and satire (Collinson & Rodrigues, 1995). Strengthening prior mentioned assumption, Lutfiputri's (2023) revelation of the dark side of hustle culture glorified in tech companies in Indonesia through memes on Instagram (by drawing upon Gramsci's (1971) concepts of cultural hegemony and resistance), disclosed that how workers employ them to show resistance against dominant overwork culture. Adding to the previous observations limited to the identification of hustle culture, this study aims at exploring multiple challenges and problems encountered by Pakistani Corporate employees in workplace through deeper comprehension of Pakistani Corporate memes.

Internet users create office memes on the basis of shared experiences, general knowledge and cultural references to relieve stress and feel superior to their challenges. According to Henman (2001), when one makes a joke about serious situation, one builds a sense of control or dominance over it that ultimately leads to reducing stress and anxiety (Romero & Cruthirds, 2007). Corporate employees form a collective group through the medium of memes based on shared experiences, for instance, one of the studies put emphasis on humor instances at workplace found in chat interactions in Maker space and revealed that humor not only elicits laughter but also plays important role in enhancing group membership and developing in-group solidarity (Vuong, 2020). Drawing upon Francis's (1994) ideas about humor's role in emotional management, corporate memes can perform their role to engender positive emotions among specific audience (office workers) by bonding them through their shared experiences, often at the expense of hurting

some excluded person(s), event(s) and object(s). Furthermore, Saqib et al. (2024) conclude that banking employees post textual posts, videos, pictures, or memes on social media for generating humor, sharing information and celebrating professional identity so that they can create broader and diverse bond within profession. The present work paves the way to understanding how corporate workers subvert workplace hierarchies and mock organization's policies through humor behind corporate memes on social media. There is possibility of presence of Carnavalesque elements in workplace memes as Bakhtin (1968, as cited in Contreras Jr., 2021) argues that "carnival exists in moments when collective action mobilizes laughter, parody, satire, and grotesquery to upset the established order." Contreras Jr. (2021) asserts that Carnavalesque memes bring online users together in digital space and create an illusion of subversion. By implementing Bakhtin's theory of carnival, Kumar (2024) reaches to the conclusion that R. K. Laxman political cartoons employ laughter and grotesqueness to create comic environment and to exhibit grimmer realities of society. Further, it is stated that Carnavalesque imagery not only offered an alternative to official imagery but also rendered an alternative construction of social relations by inverting hierarchies (Taylor, 1995, p. 20). To understand corporate memes potential, one needs to first delineate funniness behind these memes. Cognitive mechanisms allow the appreciation and interpretation of humor. Fillmore (1976) states that particular words or speech formulas, or particular grammatical choices, are associated in memory with particular frames, in such a way that exposure to the linguistic form in an appropriate context activates in the perceiver's mind the particular frame (Fillmore, 1976, p. 25). The recipient constructs two conceptual packs (Fauconnier, 1994) and merges these irrelevant spaces to produce humorous effect and develop new meanings. Human beings possess the cognitive abilities, incorporating mental simulation, conceptual reasoning and visual/non-visual perception that help in comprehending the humorous side of memes. Internet memes are complex and creative artifacts that possess intertextuality, allusions and combination of modalities and as such they can be treated as conceptual blends. Through conceptual integration, it becomes possible for office memes to create new content and meaning. The user receives the message of office meme as a whole, without detaching text from the image. It highlights the significance of text-image dependence where text cannot be understood without picture and vice versa. The text mostly takes on new meaning when blended with image. The interaction between linguistic and visual elements of these memes makes them multimodal. The recipients cannot interpret without being influenced by the cultural associations, connotations, clichés or opinions that are common to corporate employees in Pakistani work culture.

This research project expands current understanding of workplace memes by applying conceptual blending theory to examine how the receiver process humor. In addition to this, the way corporate employees use memes to challenge

and resist dominant narratives practiced in work culture is investigated by drawing upon Bakhtin's concept of Carnavalesque. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the role of humor and digital expression in employees' collective voice mechanisms, and identifies the challenges Pakistani corporate employees face by analyzing corporate memes to help Human Resource departments and companies in improving work environment and ensuring employee wellbeing.

This research work aims at finding answers to the following questions:

1. How do the receivers decode humor in corporate memes by employing cognitive mechanism?
2. How do corporate employees express resistance against company and its practices through memes?

Theoretical Framework

The blending conceptual theory is proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) to elaborate human cognitive process. This theory explores how humor arises from unexpected blending of different mental spaces. Memes usually depend on juxtaposition of images with unexpected captions or tags to evoke amusement. According to Fauconnier (1997), it is the linguistic units that construct "mental spaces and form elements of, as well as relations between, various mental spaces or within them" (Jabłońska-Hood, 2015, p. 16). A mapping refers to the association between different mental spaces which link them. Blending is the cognitive operation that is comprised of two Input Spaces, one Generic Space, and a fourth space called the Blended Space. Firstly, the Generic Space, developed by cross-spatial mapping pertains to the overall layout of the mappings between inputs. It may dictate those elements that are commonly shared by input spaces, i.e. participants, activity, situation or objects. Secondly, the input spaces are mental spaces evoked by the ongoing discourse. Thirdly, the correspondences from the input spaces are projected onto the blend. Fourth, the blend has emergent structure that happens in three interrelated ways: Composition (the projections taken together from inputs make new relations). Completion (the knowledge of background frames and cultural models permit the composite structure to be taken as self-contained structure). Elaboration (the blended structure can be elaborated and expanded, which gives rise to connotations, new content and meaning). The graphical representation of how cognitive integration occurs is given below:

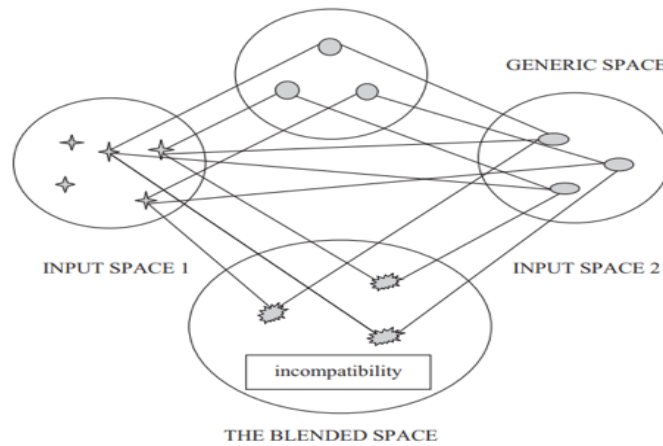


Figure 1. A schematic representation of blending processes: Conceptual Blending Theory (Jabłońska-Hood, 2015, p. 20)

To decode the resistance corporate employees express through memes, Bakhtin’s conceptions of Carnival and Carnavalesque are drawn upon. The notion of Carnavalesque undermines the beliefs and conventions of the higher authority via humor and chaos. In Rabelais and His work, Bakhtin attempts to illustrate the meaning of laughter and its collective significance. As Bakhtin states: “Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it” (1981, p. 23). The most prominent aspects of Carnavalesque practices are grotesque imagery, laughter and marketplace. Grotesque imagery can be seen as celebration of freedom permitted during carnival period. It is adopted as an alternative to the fear inspired by official imagery. Further, laughter contributes to the overcoming of fear mentioned earlier. Participants can assert their superiority through such laughter. Such kind of laughter does not embody victory of an individual but the triumph of “the great generic body of the people” (Taylor, 1995, p. 22). The marketplace refers to the place where people could feel their own collectivity: The Carnavalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 255).

Materials and Methods

The study employs qualitative approach to investigate the cognitive processes involved in interpretation of humorous memes. The primary data is manually collected from social media platforms incorporating Instagram (especially

@ecommerce.pak), Pinterest, Reddit, and Facebook. The study is consisted of corpus of 101 humorous corporate memes collected from aforementioned social media sites. To guarantee ethical data collection, only publicly available memes are captured through screenshots and downloads. The data is selected on the basis of purposive sampling ensuring the representation of diverse themes. The selected memes are classified into eight groups based on situations encountered by corporate employees. One of the six knowledge resources ‘situation’ illustrated in General theory of Verbal Humor proposed by Attardo and Raskin (1991) is identified in corporate memes. As Attardo (1994) claims, “any joke must be "about something" like changing a light bulb, crossing the road, playing golf, etc. The situation of a joke can be thought of as the "props" of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc. Any joke must have some situation, although some jokes will rely more on it, while others will almost entirely ignore it” (Attardo, 1994, p. 225). The following table shows the groups containing frequencies of corresponding situations:

Table 1: Categorization of Corporate Memes

Situations encountered by corporate employees	No. of memes
Employees facing heavy workload	24
Experiencing frustration and stress/anxiety	24
Being in toxic environment (favoritism, inequality, lack of support, unreachable expectations from employees...)	17
State of being interfered by incompetent coworkers	10
Revealing hypocrisy of employer	9
State of being paid less salary	8
Employees facing lack of motivation	5
Employees experiencing lack of recognition and appreciation	4

The frequencies indicate that corporate employees suffer from heavy workload, stress and frustration the most. Moreover, the selected memes from each category undergo analysis to unfold cognitive mechanism involved in construction

of humor. By employing conception of Carnavalesque, the analysis also concentrates on understanding how these memes challenge dominant narratives and conventional norms practiced at corporates and provide platform for marginalized voices.

Results and Discussion

1. Representation of Employees facing heavy workload

POV: You're a 9-5 employee

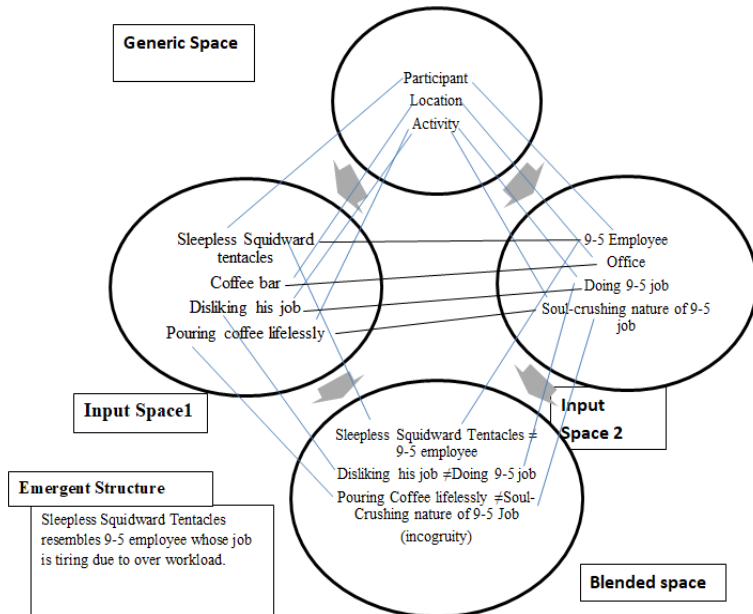


Figure 2: A meme Showcasing 9-5 employee's condition

Analysis

In Figure 2, the collage depicts sleepless Squidward Tentacles (from the cartoon series 'SpongeBob') who is pouring coffee lifelessly. His character embodies agitation with his job routine. The viewer combines two familiar concepts to make sense of the meme; one has been mentioned earlier and the second is the typical routine of 9-5 corporate employees. The Generic Space contains participants, activity and location that are common to both Input Space 1 and 2. The cartoon character is used as metaphorical expression to represent corporate workers. The humor is produced by blending conceptual structures from two incongruous domains-Squidward Tentacles, disliking his routine (Input Space 1) and 9-5 employees (Input Space 2). Input Space 1 includes a cartoon character that does not enjoy the daily work routine while Input Space 2 involves 'POV: You're a 9-5 employee' that concentrates on situation of workers at corporate jobs. The corresponding elements of Input Spaces 1 and 2 are matched through the Identification principle (using Squidward to describe corporate workers). Also, the Access principle is realized when Squidward's situation is linked with office workers' experience. The above-mentioned text in the meme reinforces the emergent structure when the viewer realizes that he is supposed to identify with

Squidward's situation. This meme serves as humorous commentary on exhaustive nature of 9 to 5 job due to heavy workload. It challenges the social expectation of employees' overwork. In addition to this, Squidward's unchanging expression is a grotesque exaggeration of office employees' dissent with their work schedule.



1.1. Flow diagram of conceptual blending

2. Representation of employees Experiencing frustration and stress/anxiety

Going back to work after a long weekend

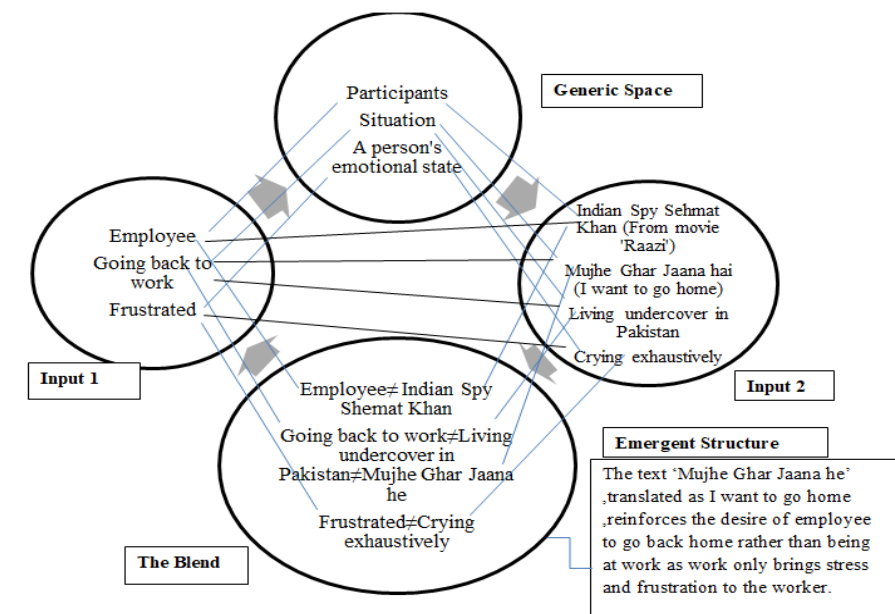
Me:



Figure 3: A meme showcasing frustration of an employee after weekend

Analysis

In Figure 3, the text mentioned above ‘going back to work after a long weekend’ is metaphorically connected with below-mentioned image containing text ‘Mujhe Ghar Jaana hai, translated as ‘I want to go home’ to make sense of the meme. Both mental spaces have participants, situation and a person’s emotional state in common that are represented through generic space. The concept of going back to work after long weekend (Input Space 1) is relatable to the depiction of Indian spy Sehmat Khan (from movie *Razzi*) crying painfully to return home (Input Space 2) by employing the Identification principle (using dialogue from movie *Razzi* to describe employees’ desire to go home). For conveying frustrating feelings of Corporate employees to escape work, the first mental space is blended with second mental space through the Access principle where the desire of Sehmat Khan to go back home is linked with Employees’ utmost urge to skip work as it only brings stress and anxiety to them. The meme creates humor by unexpected combination of two different organizational frames in viewers’ cognition. To depict the strong desire of employees to never go back to work after long relaxing weekend in humorous way, the meme utilizes exaggeration by borrowing dialogue “Mujhe Ghar Jaana Hai” written in bold caps from movie *Razzi*. Those corporate workers who are not acquainted with the movie can still resonate with the meme through frustrated expressions of female character depicted in picture. The meme indirectly mocks the company’s monotonous attitude and policies that push corporate employees to skip the work.



2.1 Flow diagram of conceptual blending

Representation of being in toxic environment (favoritism, inequality, lack of support, unreachable expectations from employees...)

work.facts

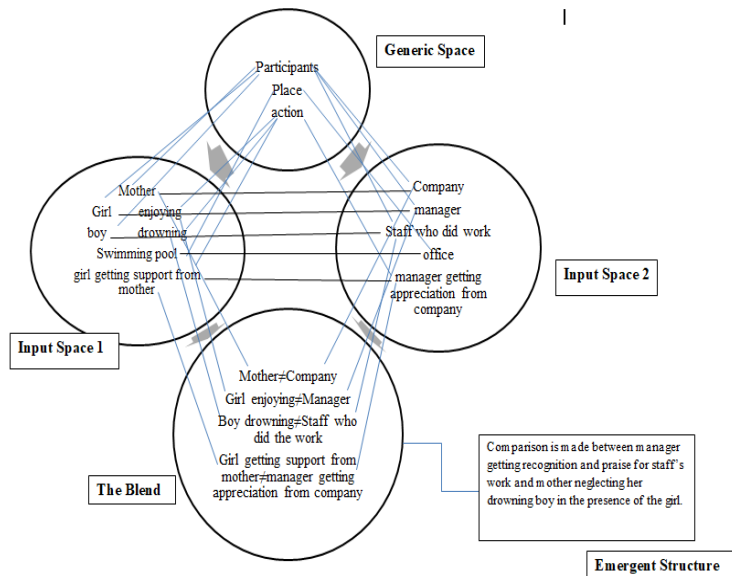


Figure 4(a): A meme showcasing favoritism and inequality

Analysis

Figure 4(a) depicts people in the swimming pool including the mother, happy girl, drowning boy who are further titled company, manager and staff who did the work respectively. The Generic Space indicates the overall layout of the mapping between two different mental spaces by highlighting the presence of participants, place and situation in both spaces. The viewers interpret this meme by blending two different concepts: (1) Input Space 1 presents mother attending to the happy girl while neglecting the drowning boy. (2) Input Space 2 contains titles given to individuals shown in image incorporating Company, manager and staff who did the work. The corresponding elements from both mental spaces are merged by the cognitive process that assists the viewers to create new meaning. The emergent structure is completed and elaborated in the meme when the efforts of the staff not recognized by the company is compared with the mother giving no attention to the drowning boy; instead manager takes all the credit for staff's hard work just similar to the situation of the happy girl getting all attention from the mother in the image. The humor resides in this unexpected combination of two differing situations provoked by the emergence of two different mental spaces. This meme can be viewed as a challenge to the power dynamics between employers and employees. The meme suggests that staff is not acknowledged and appreciated where it is due; instead the appreciation is offered to the office workers based on favoritism. The humor in the meme can be taken as form of satire directed at company and their unfairness. The meme's humor creates laughter among the viewers who identify with the presented situation, helping them overcoming the

issue of favoritism and inequality practiced at workplace temporarily. This laughter can be observed as a subversive way of criticizing workplace hierarchy.



3.1(a) Flow diagram of conceptual blending

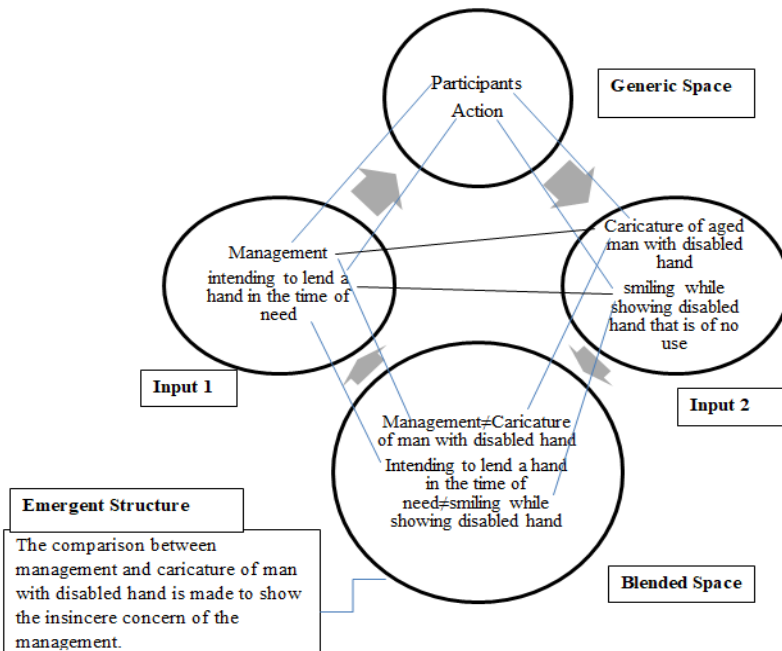


Figure 4 (b): A meme showcasing lack of support and help in workplace

Analysis

The top text in figure 4(b) written as "Management: We'll be here to lend a hand whenever you need us" triggers the receivers to interpret it as sincere concern shown by management during accomplishment of certain tasks. Input Space 1 is

developed by above-mentioned text evoking positive image of management being prepared to lend a hand to office employees in the time of need. Whereas, the image displayed below with caption “*their hands*” stimulates Input Space 2 in which a caricature of an aged bald man with disabled hand is perceived by the viewer. Both mental spaces include participants and action in common that is represented through Generic Space. The blending of corresponding elements from both mental spaces motivates the recipients to reinterpret the above-mentioned text along with the caricatured picture given below in the meme. The emergent structure is realized when the combination of these two irrelevant ideas is perceived as a message that management is not honest and they only pretend to show concern and provide help to the workers whenever required. This conceptual integration of incongruent ideas elicits laughter among those who can resonate with this situation. This meme subverts work hierarchies by mocking hypocrisy and dishonesty of management who in reality enjoys power over subordinates by manipulating them. This meme generates temporary scenario where corporate employees enjoy superiority over their superiors. The caricatured picture of an old bald man with disabled hand acts as grotesque exaggeration of management’s insincere attitude towards workers in work setting. The response of the viewers in the form of laughter serves as a powerful tool against hypocrisy of the management.



3.2 (b) Flow diagram of conceptual blending

3. Representation of State of being interfered by incompetent coworkers

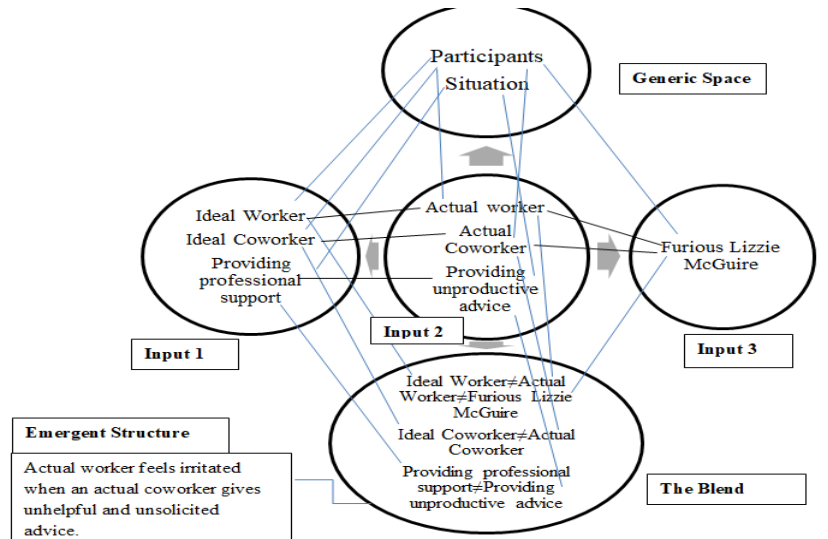
When a coworker who has no idea how to do your job, tries to tell you how to do your job...



Figure 5: A meme showcasing an employee's state of being interfered by incompetent coworkers

Analysis

In ideal corporate setting, Coworkers are supposed to maintain a certain level of professionalism during interactions. However, in actual scenario, there is lack of professionalism in coworkers in work setting. The above-mentioned text in Figure 5 evokes Input Space 1 including ideal worker and ideal coworker providing ideal professional support that is apparently absent in the image. In addition to this, the text above the image in meme stimulates Input Space 2 where actual coworker is providing unhelpful and unproductive advice on how one should do one's job. Further, the reaction of actual worker to the behavior of coworker is reinforced by the picture of furious Lizzie McGuire from 'American comedy series'. Upon developing all mental spaces, the viewers' cognitive framework blends these spaces to create new meaning. The emergent structure suggests that corporate worker feels irked when an actual coworker gives unsolicited advice. This behavior is not welcomed by employees in work culture. This meme elicits laughter among those who have experienced familiar situation. The text '*when a coworker who has no idea how to do your job, tries to tell you how to do your job*' overturns the hierarchical structure of workplace where less knowledgeable coworker tries to instruct someone who is more knowledgeable about certain task. This can be a source of exasperation for an employee. Also, the image of angry Lizzie McGuire from American comedy series can be viewed as grotesque imagery of employee's annoyance with coworker's interference and unprofessional attitude.



4.1 Flow diagram of conceptual blending

4. Representation of revealing hypocrisy of employer

My boss crying at my funeral: "how could you, we are short staffed today"

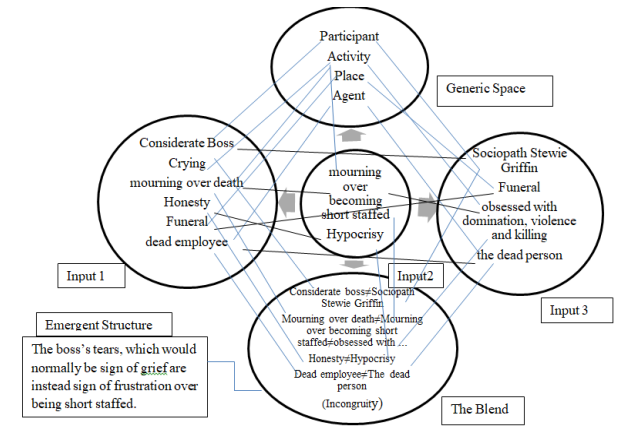


Figure 6: A meme showcasing hypocrisy of an employer

Analysis

In Figure 6, the boss is crying at the funeral of an employee because it led to shortage of staff. The generic Space constitutes participants, activity, place, and agent. The cognitive framework of the receiver helps in identifying three input spaces: (1) Input Space 1 includes the concept of considerate boss mourning over death of an employee, indicating genuine sadness. (2) Input Space 2 is marked by

the boss crying over becoming short staffed due to employee’s death. (3) Input Space 3 involves sociopath Stewie Griffin who is mourning over the dead person that is contrary to Character’s personality as he is obsessed with domination, killing and violence in the cartoon series *Family Guy*. The humor is generated by blended space where the boss’s tears are not the result of genuine grief over employee’s death but rather the receiver reinterprets it as the frustration over becoming short staffed due to employee’s absence. Also, the portrayal of Stewie Griffin in the meme intensifies this idea of the employer’s inconsiderate behavior. The text ‘*My boss crying at my funeral: how could you, we are short staffed today*’ highlights the suspension of workplace hierarchy. The corporate employees mock the hypocrisy of the employer through this meme. The image of boss’s fake tears acts as a grotesque exaggeration of the way boss is preferring work over employee’s death. It utilizes humor to illustrate this insincere situation.



5.1 Flow diagram of conceptual blending

5. Representation of State of being paid less salary

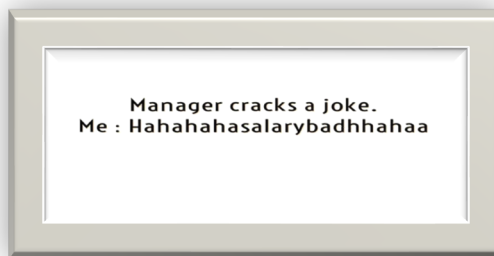
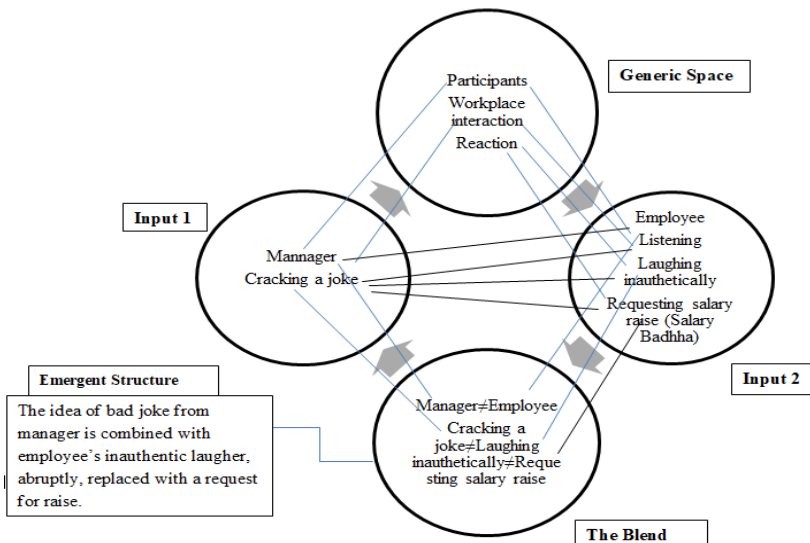


Figure 7: A meme showcasing issue of less salary

Analysis

Within organizational structure, certain established societal norms specify the degree of professionalism between employers and employees that must be followed at every cost. Figure 7 presents a textual meme featuring workplace interaction between manager and employee where the manager cracks a joke and the employee responds with exaggerated laughter. The use of first person pronoun reinforces the idea that the receiver is supposed to resonate with this situation. In this meme, the manager acts as a source (Input Space 1) of funny stimuli, however, the employee responds with excessive laughter (Input Space 2) that surpasses genuine amusement. The blended space developed in viewers' minds implies that Employee's response is not driven by the inherent humor of the joke itself but rather by the employee's position within workplace hierarchy. Additionally, the employee's excessive laughter, coupled with text *Salary badha* (translated as give me a raise) is used as strategic tool to request for salary increase. This witty use of language sheds light on the pressure employees may feel during such interactions to the advantage of their career development. A manager's joke is normally expected to be met with laughter from subordinates but this meme undermines this expectation by suggesting that the employees only laugh because they want a raise. It criticizes the notion that the employees are obligated to find their superiors' humor always funny. Moreover, the laughter 'Hahahahasalarybadhahaa' is exaggerated and extended, which can be taken as grotesque representation of forced amusement employees express only to curry favor with their superiors.



6.1 Flow diagram of conceptual blending

6. Representation of employees facing lack of motivation

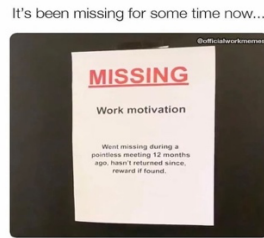
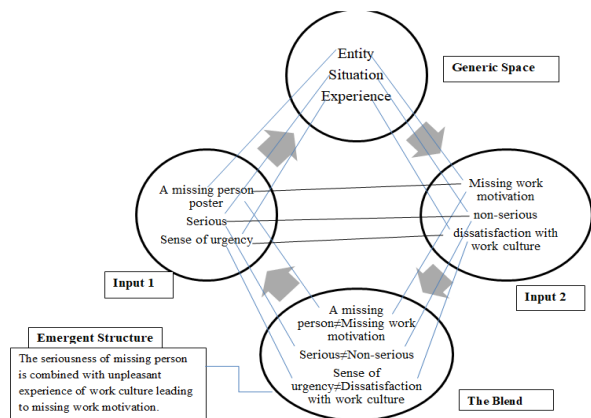


Figure 8: A meme showcasing lack of motivation at work

Analysis

Figure 8 shows Missing person poster used to find work motivation that went missing during a pointless meeting 12 months ago. In this meme, the missing person's poster evokes the idea of serious situation and a sense of urgency (Input Space 1), whereas, the concept of missing work motivation (Input Space 2) marks the presence of non-serious situation and employees' dissatisfaction with work culture (due to practice of useless meetings). Additionally, the features of missing person's poster such as missing date and reward are applied to make the abstract idea of missing work motivation seem more plausible. Here the idea of work motivation is personified as living being. The emergent structure appears upon blending of both mental spaces where the serious nature of missing person is compared with trivial experience of employees lacking motivation due to irregular meetings. This meme is a playful jab at the idea of remaining constantly motivated in work culture. It resists the typical expectation of finding fulfillment in the office work. The notion of work motivation being missing like human being is used as hyperbole to elicit laughter.



7.1 Flow diagram of conceptual blending

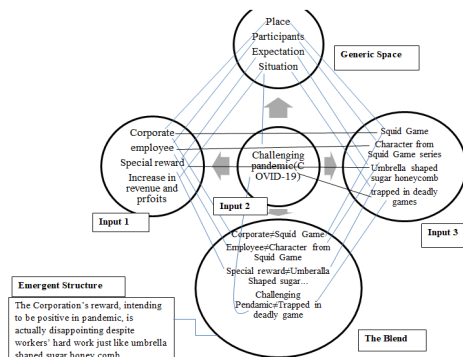
7. Representation of employees experiencing lack of recognition and appreciation



Figure 9: A meme showcasing lack of recognition at work

Analysis

In Figure 9, the meme displays the reward given to employees for their hard work that resulted in profits. The recipient develops Input Space 1 by interpreting above-mentioned text *Corporate: We have a special reward for everyone as a thanks for increasing our revenue and profits this year despite the challenging pandemic!* The word *Pandemic* evokes Input Space 2 that points toward COVID-19. The picture in the meme establishes Input Space 3 where Character from Squid Game series is shown carrying tiny umbrella shaped sugar honeycomb. The small umbrella shaped candy sarcastically symbolizes the insignificance of reward actually given to workers. Upon blending these incongruent mental spaces, the viewer constructs the emergent structure which contrasts the expected reward from Corporation (Input Space 1) with reality of receiving reward (Input Space 2) equivalent to small size of sugar honeycomb (Input Space 3). The incongruity between expectation and reality makes this meme humorous. It criticizes the corporates' gestures of appreciation for employees. It shows that the rewards are disappointing as they fail to acknowledge employees' sacrifices. It suspends the power relationship between employer and employee by questioning Corporate's behavior.



8.1 Flow diagram of conceptual blending

Conclusion

The analyses of these corporate memes offer valuable insights into how the recipients process underlying humor in the light of conceptual blending theory. Aligning with Lei's (2023) observations, the study unfolds that office memes rely on associations between presented texts and images to create humor. The data revealed that despite the presence of different kinds of input spaces, the basic cognitive processes behind each corporate meme remain the same.

Consistent with Jabłońska-Hood's (2015) results, the Conceptual integration theory delineated the nature and meaning of corporate memes in a successful manner. It not only sheds light on the creation of humor through cognitive mechanisms but also takes into account other extra-linguistic factors responsible for generating familiarization incorporating general knowledge, context, personal experiences, culture and society. The viewers of the corporate memes develop different mental spaces by getting exposure to the text and image present in the meme and merge the corresponding elements of all Input Spaces to interpret humor and create meaning.

Furthermore, the study revealed that corporate memes play vital role in expressing resistance against the authority and company's policies and norms, corroborating Lutfiputri's (2023) assertions. Notably, the study uncovered that office memes have become powerful tool for inverting dominant workplace discourses, questioning work hierarchies and mocking corporation's behavior. The corporate memes provide employees a platform to raise collective voice against Corporate's attitude and work culture. Resonating with Kumar's (2024) analysis of Carnavalesque in political cartoons, it is uncovered that the creators of selected corporate memes employed visual metaphors, grotesque imagery, hyperbole, and sarcasm to critique corporate's norms and practices. It may be impossible for employees to express criticism directly due to power inequality. So, the memes on social media can be seen as a medium through which corporate employees can share their experiences and the injustice they are encountering in humorous and lighter way. Adding to Conway's et al (2019) observations regarding voicing of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with job through tweets on Twitter, the office memes chosen from social media sites other than Twitter (Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook) have raised concern regarding problems faced by corporate employees including heavy workload, lack of recognition of employees hard work, frustration due to work culture, insincerity of the employers, less salaries, lack of motivation, lack of support, irrational behavior of coworkers, inequality and favoritism.

In a nutshell, the study draws attention to the creativity of humor in corporate memes unmasked by conceptual blending, highlighting its ability to serve as a tool for criticism, subversion of power relations, collective acknowledgement and assertion of new perspectives. The results are especially significant for corporations in Pakistani culture. The findings suggest that the corporate memes

raise voice against many issues faced by employees and mock the authority in humorous manner by employing techniques such as grotesque exaggeration, visual metaphors, hyperbole, satire and imagery. Ultimately, this research work contributes to a deeper comprehension of humor in workplace memes from cognitive-linguistic standpoint and its pivotal role in expressing resistance against dominant work culture within digital realm. The scope of this research paper is limited to the study of Pakistani corporate memes posted on social media. This work may encourage further research into the examination of various meme genres used for resistance (satire, dark humor) and their role in bringing social change and digital activism. Also, in future, it can be analyzed how companies respond to such mediums to control narratives.

References

- Ali, S. W., & Husain, N. (2024). Humor in digital discourse: A pragmatic analysis of memes on social media. *Madani:Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplina*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10995129>
- Attardo, S. (1994). Script-based theories. In Raskin & Apte (Eds.), *Linguistic theories of humor*, (1st ed., pp. 225). Mouton de Gruyter
- Attardo, S. (2015). Humor and laughter. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin, (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis*. (2nd ed., pp. 168-188). Wiley Blackwell.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Indiana University Press.
- Collinson, D. L., & Rodrigues, S. B. (1995). 'Having fun'? : Humour as resistance in Brazil. *Organization Studies*. 16:739. DOI: 10.1177/017084069501600501
- Conway, E., Rosati, P., Monks, K., & Lynn, T. (2019). Voicing job satisfaction and dissatisfaction through Twitter: employees' use of cyberspace. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, ntw.12135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12135>
- Cruthird, K.W., & Romero, E.J. (2007). The use of humor in workplace. *IEEE Engineering Management Review*. DOI: 10.1109/EMR.2006.261378
- Diaz, C.M.C. (2013). Defining and characterizing the concept of internet meme. *CES Psicología*, 6(2), 82-104.
- Fauconnier, G., & Turner, M. (2002). *The way we think: Conceptual blending and the mind's hidden complexities*. Basic Books.
- Fillmore, C. J. (1976). Frame semantics and the nature of language. *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, 280 (1), 20-32.

- Francis, L.E. (1994). Laughter, the best mediation: Humor as emotion management in interaction. *Symbolic Interaction*, 17(2), 147–63.
- Holmes, J., & Marra, M. (2006). Humor and leadership style. *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research*, 19(2), 119–138.
- Holmes, J. (2000). Politeness, power, and provocation: How humor functions in the workplace. *Sagejournals*, 2(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445600002002002>
- Jabłońska-Hood, J. (2015). *A conceptual blending theory of humor: Selected British comedy productions in focus* (Vol. 36). In B. Lewandowska & L. Bogucki (Eds.), Peter Lang. DOI: 10.3726/978-3-653-05306-7
- Lutfiputri, N.F. (2023). Meme as a tool for resistance towards hustle culture: A critical discourse analysis. *Ultimacomm*, 2(14).
- Mak, B.C.N., Liu, Y., & Deneen, C.C. (2012). Humor in the workplace: A regulating and coping mechanism in socialization. *DISCOURSE & COMMUNICATION*. DOI: 10.1177/1750481312437445
- Mao, J. Y., Chiang, J.T.J, Zhang, Y., & Gao, M. (2017). Humor as a relationship lubricant: The implications of leader humor on transformational leadership perceptions and team performance. *J. Leadersh. Organ. Stud.* 24, 494–506. DOI: 10.1177/1548051817707518
- Mesmer-Magnus, J., Glew, D.J., & Viswesvaran, C. (2012). A Meta-analysis of positive humor in the workplace. *J. Manag. Psychol.*, 27, 155–190. DOI: 10.1108/02683941211199554
- Ostanina-Olszewska, J., & Majdzińska-Koczorowicz, A. (2019). A cognitive linguistics approach to internet memes on selected Polish internet sites. *CSH Protocols*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.11649/cs.1939>
- Saqib, S.I., Allen, M.M.C., Martínez Lucio, M., & Allen, M. (2024). Sustaining solidarity through social media? Employee social-media groups as an emerging platform for collectivism in Pakistan. *Work Employment and Society*, 38(3), 636–656.
- Taylor, B. (1995). Bakhtin, carnival, and comic theory. [PhD Thesis]. University of Nottingham, UK.
- Tremblay, M., & Gibson, M. (2016). The role of humor in the relationship between transactional leadership behavior, perceived supervisor support, and citizenship behavior. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 23(1), 39–54. DOI: 10.1177/1548051815613018

- Vetter, L., & Gockel, C. (2016). Can't buy me laughter-humor in organizational change. *Gruppe Interaktion Organisation (GIO)*, 47(4), 313–320. DOI: 10.1007/s11612-016-0341-7
- Vuong, H. (2020). Humor at the workplace a case study of chat interaction in a maker community. [PhD Thesis]. University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
- Petrosyan, A. (2024, December 12). *Number of internet and social media users worldwide as of April 2024*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>
- Yus, F. (2023). *Pragmatics of internet humour*. Springer International Publishing.