



A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MEMES AS PROPAGANDA IN GLOBAL CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Now, it is quite natural for propaganda to accompany the war but its form has evolved and expanded from the use of traditional media only to include the online media, through which memes play a big role for the public opinion moulding. Our paper is in-depth research on how one country made use of memes for their propaganda work during a period of political tensions (the 2026 one country – a superior country conflict, to be precise). To make our points vivid, we examined how memes with both texts and pictures as well as signs were used to send certain ideologies, and how the three elements of the memes worked co-operatively toward achieving that aim. The sample that we drew was 15 selected memes. We chose them per certain principles, that is, our purpose sampling. All those selected memes had been posted to the public by an official Twitter/X account of the One Country Embassy in South Africa, in particular. Combining Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Kress and van Leeuwen and the model of ideological representation by Van Dijk, this study tries to find out what is the role of the combination of language and images in a communicative context where persuasion is the main objective. The results reveal that besides functioning for entertainment purposes, memes can be viewed as a way or means through which the state makes its politics and culture known by, in a way, legitimizing its narratives or even portraying conflicts in a way favourable to itself. We want to underline that our paper is a significant contribution to the academic discourse on digital propaganda since it highlights how a multifaceted combination of language and images serves state purposes and, at the same time, is able to simplify the complex political events into catchy and persuasive bits of propaganda.

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Memes, Propaganda, Digital Communication, Political Discourse

A. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to modern political propaganda, the decision of the winning or losing wars is not only dependent on the army, speeches at conferences, or news releases. With the advent of social media in the Web 2.0 stage, internet has become a means of public expression, through which people can communicate, get information, etc. So, modern wars too are conducted so that has digital features. The main feature is multi-mode discursive strategies which even a weapon, can become a medium of the warfare not only in words but also as a means of stirring-up people, as well as a vehicle of ideologies, etc. In fact, a new type of communication, i. e. memes which due to the very fact that, once the user clicks them, they can appear instantly and That's why they have been popular.

Internet memes are now understood academically not just as jokes but rather as shifting discursive methods and argumentative forms (Wiggins, 2019). Based on Milner, Miltner et al.

political memes use the combination of visuals and/or a written text to explain some very complicated aspects of a political issue that a regular audience wouldn't notice. These kinds of memes are very subtle in the manner they communicate political ideas and That means they can gain a certain level of trust that the idea being propagated is true without disclosing or at all revealing where the idea comes from. Here again, we see that a weapon is a vehicle of the message and it is a war tool. In fact, it is only a short step from recognizing a political message that is being spread in a humorous way to seeing that behind the laughter is the propagandist work being done. The power of such memes also comes from their multi-interpretative nature, that is, their ability to mix words and images to get several levels of information simultaneously, popular culture and symbolic references to political discourse, so as the creation of a shared understanding (Shifman, 2014; Wagener, 2021). Visually speaking, these forms of political propaganda are capable of capturing the public eye and setting a target by identifying a competitor. For example, in the war between the two parties to the Gaza conflict, the use of humour, irony and satire through the use of memes was an extremely effective and even an almost invisible method of conveying one's point of view. It may be considered that since the concept of internet memes as a war tool and their high effectiveness in information dissemination, in particular by internet means, has been accepted, the research literature that discusses digital propaganda and political memes still mostly deals, on one side, with Western democracies' elections, neo-Nazism or on the other side with the wartime situation of one party against another (Hakoköngäs et al. 2020; Poepsel et al. 2024; Mejova et al. 2025).

On the contrary, papers addressing One country digital strategy mostly highlight disinformation and fake media manipulation (Brooking & Kianpur, 2020; Bagozzi et al. 2025). That being the case, studying and using memes to political ends are research domains where there seems to be no or hardly any effort to explore the question of propaganda as a form of multimodal texts. Henceforth this study is as essential as an addition to our theoretical system of how informational war is performed nowadays on one hand, while it has the capacity to offer the means of counter-narrativizing via counter-memes in a geopolitical scenario on the other. The paper is analysing the multimodal political discourse of memes in two cases that were shared on the embassy's official social media account, i. e. the embassy of the Islamic Republic of One country. The two cases, which have been selected for discussion, are the tweets of the One country Embassy to South Africa that were released about the confrontation between One country and Superpower state in 2026. An official account of an embassy is key on this. So, these memes were not the result of casual user-generated content but were released with the approval of an embassy and were the propaganda tools sanctioned and supported by the State.

In this research paper, I am trying to answer these three questions: what influence or help do visuals or non-verbal cues give in the construction of propaganda meanings of One country political memes? How can writing carry and express political or ideological points of view? Lastly, how can visual images and words together create layers of meaning and explain the interpretations of geopolitical situations? This paper wants to present how even a small piece of content from the internet that, on first sight, does not seem to mean a lot may, at the same time, compress political messages and take part in the world's international war of symbols and facts.

B. METHOD

This qualitative research makes use of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to explore how Islamic Republic of Iran utilises the internet as a digital propaganda tool during contemporary geopolitics conflicts.

Research Design and Data Collection

The database comprises of a non-probability sample with 15 political memes posted on the X account of the one country Embassy in South Africa related to the 2026 One country-a superpower state war. The method of purposive sampling ensured the materials studied are Actually directly related to aspects such as political representation, ideological positioning, and multimodal propaganda communication (Patton, 2015). The procedure of data gathering was very systematic: memes on Iran-Israel dispute and geopolitical tensions between the US and its allies were obtained from publicly available internet sources, vetted for clear political / ideological contents, identified with codes (M1 to M15), and grouped based on dominating propaganda themes (refer Table 1).

Table 1. Composition of the Meme Corpus and Thematic Classification

Code	Meme Label	Theme
M1	One country Empire vs another name	Civilizational and Symbolic Superiority
M2	Back to Stone Age	Civilizational and Symbolic Superiority
M3	Lion vs Dogs	Civilizational and Symbolic Superiority
M4	Pomegranate Juice / Missile	Military Deterrence and Strategic Control
M5	Shark / one country Soldier	Military Deterrence and Strategic Control
M6	Baby one other name / Hormuz Strait	Military Deterrence and Strategic Control
M7	One other landmark leader–other one	Moral and Historical Delegitimization
M8	War Criminals	Moral and Historical Delegitimization
M9	One leader–to another famous leader	Moral and Historical Delegitimization
M10	Healing Ministry	Political Incompetence and Irrational Leadership
M11	Psychiatrist / Delusion	Political Incompetence and Irrational Leadership
M12	Airplane Mode	Political Incompetence and Irrational Leadership
M13	LEGO Betrayal	Contradiction, Betrayal, and Humanitarian Framing
M14	We Won	Contradiction, Betrayal, and Humanitarian Framing
M15	Minab	Contradiction, Betrayal, and Humanitarian Framing

Data Analysis Framework

The system used combines the visual grammar method by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) with that of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The visual analysis mainly deals with representational meaning (participants actions symbols) interactive meaning (focus, social distance, point of view), and compositional meaning (formatting salience information value). At the same time, the verbal text is looked at with captions slogans word choices, persuasive appeals (joking around hyperbole irony), and other features of persuasive language. All these aspects are looked at from the angle of Van Dijk's (1998) model of ideological representation

which highlights positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, us versus them kind of polarization, and the other types of propaganda.

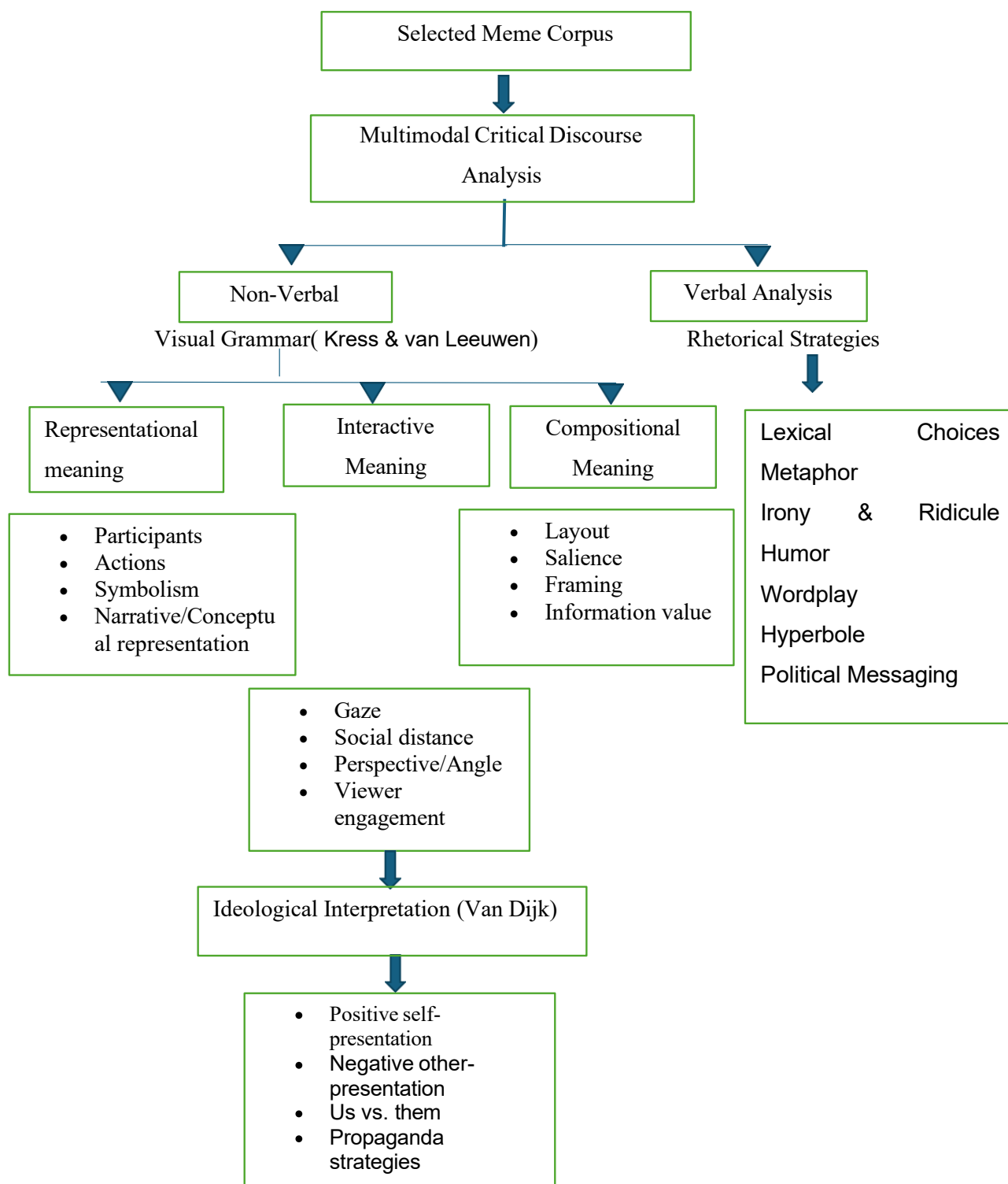


Figure 1. Analytical Framework for the Multimodal Analysis of Iranian Political Meme.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results obtained via multisense analyses are classified according to the recurring propaganda themes detected in the chosen corpus.

M1 to M3 are Civilizational and Symbolic Superiority Together, these memes' picture and word materials present one country as one with its ancient culture and strong spirit versus its rivals who are shown as very backward and defenceless. Meaning in pictures is very symbolic: M1 shows by contrast how a Persian monarch would have been a very stately and elegant figure versus how a famous leader is a real caveman - a symbol of primitiveness. In M3, metaphors of animals help to create a pecking order where a magnificent lion is visually placed above a bunch of small noisy barking dogs by showing their size differences. Medium and long close-ups together with frontal/low angles, due to the film editing, show other country power and social separation. In words, the captions again show the opposition through these contrasts; such sarcastic captions as "Stone Age? " And the mock barking "Woof! Woof! " Are employed to depict a decayed, helpless opposition in a comic way.



Figure 2. Memes Representing Civilizational and Symbolic Superiority (M1–M3).

Military Deterrence and Strategic Control (M4-M6) The memes convey the themes of being able to hold their military forces while at the same time having the capability of making their presence felt to the enemies. M4 features Iranian soldiers plus missiles and military vehicles as visual symbols of their military might and technology prowess. In contrast, M5 shows an American soldier, weak and helpless, being hunted by a shark in the Persian Gulf while M6 symbolizes a landmark leader as a baby playing with toy weapons on the map displaying the location of the Strait of Hormuz. Information value-wise these memes focus attention on the capability of another military force as it places the strategic capability of them at the centre while the weakness of the opponents is depicted through separation and isolation. About language, the use of hyperbole and dark humour is very striking. M4 caption says "Drink pomegranate juice so that you can hit Tel Aviv more accurately, " it is a light-hearted exaggeration of the soldier's skill while M6 says "Not a game, kiddo. " It clearly points out famous leader's strategic naivety.



Figure 3. Memes Representing Military Deterrence and Strategic Control.

The main idea of this section, Moral and Historical Delegitimization (M7-M9), is moving away from military metaphors and depicting enemy leaders as perpetrators of historic atrocities and criminals that they are morally wrong. In M7, the faces of one other landmark leader—other one is combined together visually. The main point is to have an image confrontation that the viewer can't avoid. In M8, a famous leader handshake scene symbolizes a geopolitically successful moment compared to Trump who is bringing a national downfall as a result. The M9 image has One leader—to another famous leader as if they were wearing prison uniforms. From a verbal perspective, words like "war crimes" and "life imprisonment" create a judicial discourse, transforming ordinary political people into convicts, a transformation further reinforced by the irony of repetitiveness in "I destroyed" in M8.



Figure 4. Memes Representing Moral and Historical Delegitimization.

Political Incompetence and Irrational Leadership (M10-M12) In this theme, Plainly the leaders are making bad decisions that are based on their own biases and without sufficient evidence. M10 frames Healing Ministry as a "fake healer" and the use of the religious signs is

the way of pointing this out. M11 But portrays War Criminals in a doctor's office making different and illogical statements to the psychiatrist while M12 features a dislocated design showing War Criminals not involved in the situation anymore while his team stays alert. A wordplay of "Healing Ministry" conceals moral inconsistencies and the word "delusion" points out the lack of touch with the real world as if that was not enough to convey war criminal's political inefficiency and false authority. It is only "Running the country... on airplane mode" that metaphorically finalizes the storyline.



Figure 5. Memes Representing Political Incompetence and Irrational Leadership (M10–M12).

Contradictions, Betrays, and Humanitarian Angle. Here we have three memes showing a humanized cost of war and the gap between political slogans and reality. For M13, a betrayal is depicted through successive two-panel images (from a friend to a betrayer). M14 shows a landmark leader at the heart of destruction holding up a victory banner. M15 highlights emotionally touching civilian items - a big school bag, a doll, and pieces of destruction. Metaphors like "kiss" and "hammer" used together emphasize exploitation (M13). Saying "We won", a line delivered by a landmark leader in 1993 and widely misunderstood at that time, gives a very strong contrast with the images of a post-atomic scenario (M14). Calling Minab "the eternal shame of humanity" (M15) makes a national scandal a universal moral disaster.



Figure 6. Memes Representing Contradiction, Betrayal, and Humanitarian Framing (M13–M15)

Discussions

The study reveals that One state political meme not only visually represent events but also function at a higher level, they constitute an intricate and well-thought-out mode of propaganda that guides and regulates perceptions of different sides of the ideological and military divide over the 2026 conflict.

To find out how ideologies were drawn visually, one first needs to understand the key factors that are most influential through the means of the visuals. Visual features like colour framing layout are essential for determining the ideological line. Symbols constantly show through composition, focus, and space arrangement One country being a historically entitled and militarily dominant country (e. g. M1 M3, M4) or showing their opponents as tiny or putting the focus on the sufferings of ordinary people (M15) at the same time. These findings support the view that memes are persuasive visual arguments and they can change the perception. This has also been demonstrated in some research work (e. g. Hakoköngäs et al. 2020; Walters et al. 2023).

The second research question explores what functions written materials play in ideological persuasion. It was found that rather than being descriptive supplements, the text itself was a discursive device of considerable power. It is through lexicon irony parody, and humour that these political messages have been presented in such ways, and this served to undermine the legitimacy of political leaders. For example, labelling a leader "War Criminal" in M8 is one such humorous expression, as is using the "airplane mode" metaphor in M12 to depict leaders who avoid taking responsibility while they should. It is well documented that humorous elements of memes often have a strong indirect advertising effect (Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019).

The most significant is that by answering the third research question, the authors conclude that the ideological strength of a meme is only derived from the interaction of multiple modes of

expression. For instance, meanings and effects of propaganda arise from different modes that come together in this synthesis - one being the dramatic discrepancy in the visual portrayal and the textual claim of "We have been victorious" in M14 that is actually the opposite as per the situation around us, that's a great way to highlight the difference between images and words. When these texts are evaluated about the ideological square of Van Dijk (1998, 2006), it is clear that there is a very clear picture emerging in the form of ideological and political polarization. Table 2 illustrates the way these ideological interactions lead to a realization of different propagandist goals in a concrete manner.

Table 2. Synthesis of Thematic Findings, Propaganda Functions, and Ideological Construction

Emerging Theme	Main Propaganda Function	Ideological Construction (Van Dijk's Ideological Square)
Civilizational and Symbolic Superiority (M1-M3)	Constructing One country as an ancient, resilient, and legitimate civilization while portraying its opponents as weak and historically inferior.	Positive self-presentation: One country is constructed as culturally superior and legitimately powerful, whereas Western actors are represented as inferior.
Military Deterrence and Strategic Control (M4-M6)	Normalizing one country military capability and portraying deterrence as necessary for national security.	Positive self-presentation / Negative other presentation: One country is a responsible regional power; Superpower state leadership is strategically weak and immature.
Moral and Historical Delegitimization (M7-M9)	Delegitimizing political opponents through moral condemnation, criminalization, and historical comparison.	Negative other presentation: Opponents are systematically represented as criminals and historically discredited figures.
Political Incompetence and Irrational Leadership (M10-M12)	Undermining the credibility of political leadership by exposing hypocrisy, irrationality, and disconnection from reality.	Negative other presentation: Superpower state political leadership is portrayed as deceptive, unstable, and incapable of governance.
Contradiction, Betrayal, and Humanitarian Framing (M13-M15)	Exposing political betrayal, challenging victory narratives, and constructing humanitarian condemnation.	Us vs. Them polarization: One country is the morally justified side; opponents are exploitative and responsible for humanitarian suffering.

These findings illustrate that One country state-sponsored memes heavily employ positive in-group presentation alongside severe negative out-group presentation to marginalize alternative perspectives (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019).

D. CONCLUSION

This study argues that political memes are not merely a form of marginal humour on the web, but rather a set of short persuasive multimodal propaganda texts in modern information warfare. The study's analysis of one country Embassy in South Africa's memes showed that combining images and words effectively conveyed the narrative of One country's superiority,

military deterrence, and legitimacy, while at the same time the opponents were labelled as clumsy, crazy, and illegitimate.

But the study is confined in scope as it is qualitative by nature only. The restricted amount of data with just 15 memes used cannot provide enough information to make generalized statements to all forms of One country digital propaganda. And, memes in general can be understood in different ways. Perhaps people, depending upon their cultural or ideological background, would see these texts as satire and not as state propaganda. Future study should explore how audience engages with a piece of content quantitatively. Also, expanding the research to different platforms would provide deeper insight into the effects of state-sponsored memetic warfare on public opinion worldwide.

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