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INTERNET MEMES AS INSTRUMENTS  
OF SUBVERSION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
ISLAM AND MUSLIMS

GEETANJALI KALA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates the nature of **internet memes** as instruments of **subversion** in the context of **Islam and Muslims**. For the purpose of this research, internet memes including **Twitter** hashtags have been conceived as idea units. The study employed **network analysis** to examine roughly 208,000 Twitter hashtags related to Islam and Muslims. Based on this data, actor and hashtag networks were created in order to understand the relationship between leading actors, co-occurring hashtags, dominant discursive practices, and their subversion. **Thematic analysis** of internet memes was also undertaken in order to study the visual and textual elements in the larger context in which the memes were set. Two major themes emerged: 'Everyday life and Lived Religion', and 'Terrorism, Security and Surveillance'. The study provides evidence of agency of individuals to create fissures in the institutional narratives by reappropriating and subverting the popular symbols originally created by social structures as well as creating their own set of language which is unique to the format of internet memes. The findings derived from the network analysis as well as the thematic analysis also demonstrated the relevance of Richard Dawkins's (1976) **gene-meme analogy**.

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### **Declaration**

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

- Geetanjali Kala

## 1. Introduction

*“Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others”*

Michel de Certeau, 2011, p 64

The above quote by Certeau (2011) partially captures the essence of the following work which is partly about the role of mimicry and memetics in our everyday lives i.e. copying information, making changes in it, passing it on, forging communities based on ideas that are in some measure inherited undeviatingly from religious, social, political and economic dogmas that surround us and in part subverted and innovated at an individual's end by 'procedure of everyday creativity' (de Certeau, 2011, p66). The evidence in the form of internet memes show that the 'poiesis' which Certeau (2011, p65) argued in the context of 'consumption' being 'hidden, invisible and mute' is not so hidden anymore. In fact, it is not only visible, but it also has its own unique language. The evidence warns against the individual-social binary when gauging the issue of what contributes to an individual's idea sphere. Instead, it makes a case for an individual-social-material-memetic complex, which presents evidence of thriving activity and dynamism in the sphere of 'poaching' of ideas, being 'poached' by ideas and the material relationality of this exchange.

### 1.1. Background

From time immemorial human beings have communicated their thoughts using visual and oral symbols. If the exchange of these symbols, which primarily carry ideas about our inner and outer world, is understood as a process of communication, then challenging the existing set of ideas in the process of communication, can be understood as an act of subversion. The process of challenging and contesting – mediated (religion, mass media, governments) and 'imagined' (Anderson, 1991) – ideas about themselves and 'Others' (Hall, 1994; Said, 1995 [1978]) by people is engendered by their dominant and repressive structural and material realities. In this context, the concept of subversion can be understood as a political tool to manifest dissent (Yakoub and Zemni, 2020), 'self-narration and self-representation' (Matar, 2019; Ahmad and Thorpe, 2020), intentional 'narrative worldbuilding' by 'disclosing' (Sabry, 2021) in the face of dominant ideologies (Butler, 2011; Bacon, 2021). Figure 1 is an example of self-representation by a young Canadian Muslim which makes a point about how a Muslim man believes he is represented (by others), expected to be (by parents) and how he sees himself.



Figure 1: An example of self-representation using a meme by a young Canadian Muslim

Most of the dictionaries define subversion as the act of overthrowing a system or government secretly. This is in line with the significant number of studies conducted on subversion in the realm of international relations. For example, some of the keywords in the studies conducted by RAND corporation, a leading thinktank in the USA, in the context of subversion are ‘Insurgency, Terrorism, Terrorist Organisations, Low-Intensity Conflict, National security, Global Security, Peacekeeping and Stability Operations and Public Safety’ (Clutterbuck and Rosenau, 2009; Rosenau, 2007; Radin, Demus and Marcinek, 2020). In this work, subversion is not used in the above sense; rather, it is partly understood as ‘the art of the weak’ (de Certeau, 2011, p37) towards ‘reappropriating space’. Oxford English Dictionary (2021) meets this research’s purpose to a large extent in defining subversion as: ‘the action or process of undermining the power and authority of an established system or institution...’ and ‘the overturning... an established or existing practice, belief, rule, etc.... the transformation of a state of things...’. For the purpose of this work, the operative definition of subversion will be any form of day-to-day creative contestation in a normative or popular form of an idea. And the findings of this work clearly show that in contesting the dominant tropes, the act of subversion gives rise to a new, diverse set of tropes by the way of creative expressions which represents an ever-evolving, dynamic (sometimes not very easy to decipher) mesh of narratives which challenges the seat of dominant ideas in its own little ways. However, when a small act of challenging and presenting an alternative catches the attention of many, then it assumes a noteworthy space in the ideosphere.

Ideas- cultural, religious, political, economic – have spread for aeons. The most fundamental to the most complex phenomenon of our times can be reduced to ideas that can catch the attention of a considerable number of people. From the stone tools by *Homo erectus* (Rightmire & Tobias, 2017, para23), to the religious idea of one God, to democracy as a political model of governance;

some ideas have travelled from society to society quite successfully. Ideas can be understood as ‘identifiable cultural units’ (Dennett, 2010, p190). Most of the man-made cultural practices and their forms like clothes, language, food, music; can be reduced to ideas. An idea or a set of ideas that spreads in the form of its original or mutated copies can be understood as a meme (Dawkins, 1976). This work treats ideas as memes (Dawkins, 1976). Richard Dawkins – a popular science communicator, in 1976 for the first time conceived the idea of memes or used the term ‘meme’, in his book *The Selfish Gene*. He introduces the idea of a meme, in his work which otherwise focuses on genes, as a ‘didactic device’ (Dawkins, 2013). He argues that genes might not be the only replicating units and that the process of ‘natural selection can work on any copyable information’ (Dawkins, 2013). In Dawkins’ view, whistling tunes, words, catchphrases – any idea or cultural practice that is copyable information and has successfully passed on from one to the other – qualifies to be a meme.

Ideas need communication instruments like language to manifest themselves and, therefore in order to study the patterns of subversion in ideas, one needs to choose a form of communication like poetry, films, books, theatre, soaps, etc. This study uses internet memes as a vehicle of subversive ideas. Internet memes have been identified as a perfect site to understand the subversion of ideas (Gal, Shifman and Kampf, 2016) relating to Islam and Muslims because the internet is a ‘network of networks’ (Kahn, 2021) and this is where innumerable people, literally from across the globe exchange, endorse and refute ideas every single day and in the process make changes in those circulating ideas. It is the sheer scale of data (big data) (Frankel and Reid, 2008) that the internet provides which makes it the best site to study subversion in ideas. Moreover, there has been a substantial amount of examination of traditional media – starting from paintings, to print, to photography, to film, to newspapers and television – as they held power of representation in narrative over the narrated (Foucault, 1978; Said, 1995, 1997; Matar, 2019). Earlier scholarship mostly focused on critiquing the mainstream media content which was made ‘for audience’ in contrast to content produced ‘by audience’ after the penetration of internet technology. The powerful owned and accessed the media and represented the ‘Other’ (Said, 1997; Hall, 1994) and in the process circulated the ideas creating ‘us’ (Bacon, 2021). Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) provide rich historical evidence of the portrayal of ‘the mysterious East’ by the Western imperialist. However, this study is not directly concerned with misrepresentation, but is about self-narration, self-representation, reflexivity which is not necessarily about “conflict...but inscribed as apolitical act...underlining its potential to disrupt dominant discursive and visual fields...to generate new ways of knowing and seeing the ‘narrated’... “(Matar, 2019, para17) by individuals on the margins especially in the context of the

internet as an enabler.

The Internet as a technology is unlike anything that was seen before in terms of its ownership, spread, usage and possibilities, and has proved to be a road to Damascus for the erstwhile ‘audience’ in the shadow of a ‘media effect paradigm’, who previously only had phone-ins and letters to editors as tools of interactivity. While there is no doubt that it reflects the existing structural and material dominance and inequalities, it also presents new structural formations which are difficult to articulate only using old actors like governments, corporations, media conglomerates, multilateral organisations, celebrities, etc. at the same time. There are new actors who are staking claim in the narrative building of ‘us’ and ‘they’. In this sense, for many, internet technology has been a real equaliser to some extent. It has significantly undermined the hegemony of many gigantic traditional media instruments like the print and television media and is indicating the ‘democratisation of the owned narrative world’ (Bacon, 2021).

As Internet memes are primarily produced, ‘consumed’, and shared by common individuals having reasonable access to technology (hardware and software), and is part of their everyday creative ‘ways of operating things’ (de Certeau, 2011, p 66), this work looks at the production and circulation of internet memes as an everyday cultural practice (de Certeau, 1984, 2011). Internet memes become the ‘equipment’ (Sabry, 2021) to ‘articulate the everyday’ (de Certeau, 1984). These digital practices, in the case of this work focused on Islam and Muslims, are deeply woven with politics – producing and sharing internet memes which are used to express views using humorous tools, on a whole range of ideas, international political issues like – Israel-Palestine Conflict, America’s War on Terrorism, ISIS, the caricaturing of the prophet of Islam by Charlie Hebdo and a series of events that followed; to celebrating and critiquing the everyday cultural practices of many Muslims like observing *Hijab*<sup>1</sup>, sacrificing animals on *Id-al-Adba*<sup>2</sup>, belief in *Sharia*<sup>3</sup>, seeking *Fatwas*<sup>4</sup>, only eating food with a *Halal*<sup>5</sup> label, everyday religious utterances like *Inshallah*<sup>6</sup> and *Mashallah*<sup>7</sup> amongst others.

1 The head covering that some Muslim women wear when outside or in presence of *Ghayer-Mahram* (outsiders)

2 An annual Muslim festival marking the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca. Animals are sacrificed and their meat shared among poor people. (Collins Dictionary, 2022)

3 Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith and Sunna), prescribing both religious and secular duties (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003)

4 A ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority. (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003)

5 Quranic term used to indicate what is lawful or permitted. (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003)

6 if Allah wills it. (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003)

7 In Muslim countries, expressing praise or resignation. (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003)

Therefore, these memes in a sense become a small window into the major digital discursive practices relating to Muslims and Islam. Internet memes are extensively observed by this research as an expression of an individual's (which collectively transforms itself into a network) stance and commentary on power struggle and affairs between the countries, especially from the opponents and supporters of ideologies (like democracy as a political idea- ideologies relating to Muslims such as Wahabism, Salafism, Ahl al-Hadith, Tablighi, Deobandi, Barelvi, Sharia, etc.), countries (Syria, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, USA, UK, Europe, etc.), organisations (Hezbollah, Hamas, Taliban, Daesh, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Al-Shabab, Muslim Brotherhood, etc.), policies (on immigrants, refugees, secularism {especially in France}, multiculturalism). In addition, these digital practices are also used as sites of resistance, self-assertion, and self-identification (Goehring, 2019) by Muslims in the context of 'media-generated Muslims' (Rane, Ewart & Martinkus, 2014). However, new media platforms have also been manipulated by groups to spread hate against communities with hardly any editorial watch on them. The latest report in 2020 by Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group, which is a cross- government working group in the UK, has confirmed that the negative stereotypes about Muslims are being reinforced through social media (Awan and Khan-Williams, 2020). An example of this is the meme in figure 2, where Muslims in Europe are negatively stereotyped as increasing in number due to polygamy and a high reproduction rate.



Figure 2: An example of anti-Muslim discourse

In a way, internet memes on Islam and Muslims become a microcosm of politics – international, national(s) and individual, around Islam and Muslims. In this sense, this study is interested in the everyday political laced with cultural expressions of people (Muslims and non-Muslims) who have an opinion on Islam, its followers, and its practices, and who choose to express it using the medium of Internet memes. Figure 3 shows the use of sarcasm in memes to comment on the Israel-Palestine conflict and to highlight the hypocrisy of the Arab world, which on one hand keeps reiterating its commitment for the Palestinian cause, and on the other maintains a cordial relationship with the Israeli state.



*Figure 3: Internet meme on international politics*

While Islam and Muslims are not singular categories as there are contesting theological schools within the umbrella of Islam (the major ones being Sunni and Shia), it is therefore, extremely difficult to define who is a Muslim (as with any other ascribed religious identity). This study does not get into tensions within the theological schools of Islam. However, while critically analysing the internet memes, this study refers to the theological aspects of some of the schools (for example, Salafism) that have surfaced in the data of this study. For example, Figure 4 depicts a meme shared using #muslimmemes illustrating various factions within Muslims and how they view each other.



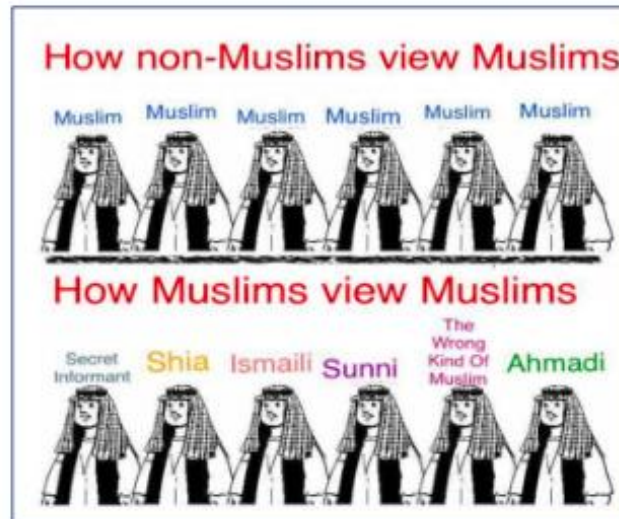


Figure 4: Various factions within Muslims

At a very fundamental level, all schools within Islam include a belief in the five fundamental pillars established since its inception- *Shahadah* (the belief that there is only one God and Mohammad is his Prophet), *Salat* (praying five times a day), *Zakat* (offering alms to the poor), *Sawm* (fasting during the Islamic month of Ramadan) and *Hajj* (affordable pilgrimage to Mecca) (Schimmel, 2021).

The internet memes identified for the purpose of this work are not simply understood as popular communication artefacts in the form of an ensemble of images and texts, they are also conceived in the form of hashtags. A Hashtag is- a “#” symbol with a key word or words or catchphrase used to tag posts by sometimes providing a stated position in relation to an ongoing topic of discussion on microblogging websites, like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. A hashtag encapsulates a whole packet of information. It might be a word or a combination of words, but it entails a story of the past and is pregnant with the stories of the future. For example, the hashtag #hijabiheroine was used by Muslim sportswomen to self-represent themselves as ‘digital space-invaders’ (Ahmad and Thorpe, 2020; Adjepong and Carrington, 2014), in order to subvert the dominant image of Muslim women as victims entrapped in veils (Ahmad and Thorpe, 2020). Similarly, the hashtag #jihadibride, was created when after the defeat of ISIS, it came to the light that Shamima Begum from the UK had fled to Syria in order to support the Islamic State in 2014. This hashtag was used to push a variety of narratives which were much larger and went beyond her personal story. For example, it was used to peddle familiar and dominant tropes of Islamic terrorism, Islamophobia, menacing immigrants, racism, radicalisation of western Muslims, etc. People also used this hashtag to argue that since Shamima was not a white woman, her citizenship was revoked without much noise for the same reason. This hashtag was also used to discuss the

politics of the Labour party and the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, which some people claimed was based on appeasing the immigrants. Therefore, hashtags which are being used as strategic communication tools (Gilkerson and Berg, 2017) have emerged as an important point of convergence of disparate yet connected issues. Hashtags were first used on Twitter in 2007 and have since emerged as tools for: self-organising, expressing solidarity (Cock and Pedraza, 2018, Oruc, 2019), resistance (Breideband, 2015), powerful tactic (Clark, 2016) and hate speech (Poole, Giraud and Quincey, 2021). Thus, hashtag activism (Duvall and Heckemeyer, 2017) has emerged as an important tool of subversion, 'hashtag politics' and 'everyday visibilities' (Ahmad and Thorpe, 2020).

This work has studied subversion designing two pools of hashtags (as memes) – one containing an original idea based on Islamic theology, event, or organisation; and the other carrying its subversive forms. For example- *Halal* (meaning 'permissible' in Arabic and an important concept in Islam), which as a concept was partly subverted using hashtags like #halalhumour, #halalbanter, #halaljokes, #halalcomedy, #harammemes. Similarly, ISIS was being subverted using #OpISIS, #iwilldestroyisis, #isiscrappycollagegrandprix, #isischan, #OpParis, #abuhajaar. *Jihad* (meaning 'to struggle') is one of the core concepts in Islamic theology that was found to be subverted through hashtags like #jihadibride and #jihadibarbie.

## 1.2. Why Islam and Muslims?

In order to examine subversion and its patterns, one needs a dominating set of ideas that have been historically spread successfully and therefore have followers and opponents. Religion as a collective of ideas is one such dominant social institution which once in human history had defined all aspects, including political structures of some societies, and still enjoys considerable space in some societies and people's lives. Religion, one's own or others', whether one inhabits a theocratic or a secular country; independent of our gender, race, class, caste, politics; directly or indirectly has come to have a significant bearing on our personal and social lives and therefore engenders a rich site to observe subversion. According to the Pew Research Centre's analysis (2017), more than 80 countries, out of the data gathered from 190 countries and territories around the world, favour one religion officially or unofficially. Religion can be understood as primarily a communication tool – creating and circulating ideas, concerning matters from an individual's everyday life and activities to more social subjects, from ethics, morality, and politics, to the metaphysical.

Although religion (books and institutions) constructs and communicates essentialized roles for its believers, an individual's agency of meaning-making constantly interacts with an array of belief assemblage besides the ones offered by the religion, resulting in a hybridised outcome which can be understood as 'lived religion' (Ammerman, 2015), which is often incongruent with the envisaged perfect picture of a believer, or the one portrayed by mediated stereotypes. Figure 5 shows an example that contests the perfect picture of a believer and illustrates how people negotiate the boundaries set by religious dogma. Islamic theology is strictly against both the use of substances like alcohol or drugs, and the consumption of pork; however, the below tweet shows that the person has chosen to follow one Quranic decree and ignore the other. Not just that, he is also using this fact to create humour by labelling it 'halal-haram ratio'. Figure 6 provides an example of everyday 'lived religion'. While a typical Muslim might be seen as all-knowing about the codes set by the maulvis, this meme provides a window into an ordinary young Muslim man's little knowledge of Islamic concepts, employing humour by using the oft-used phrase *Allahu Alim*, which roughly translates into 'Allah knows best' and is used as a euphemism for 'I don't know'. In this sense, this work problematizes the conception of a believer and religion (as opposed to lived religion), which has been used as an excuse to peddle hate and evoke hysteria (from both ends-people who are part of this system and who oppose it) in order to meet narrow political gains in many parts of the world.



Figure 5: Contest the perfect picture of a believer

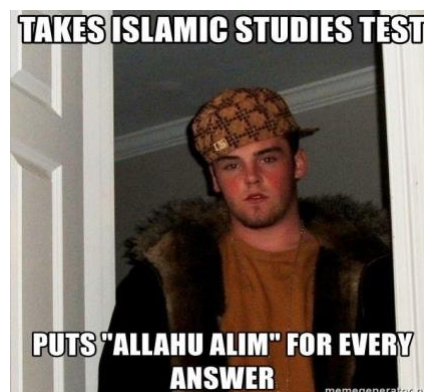


Figure 6: An example of everyday 'lived religion'

The study has chosen Islam (and popular ideas relating to it like *Jihad*, *Hijab*, *Halal*, *Haram*, *Jannah*, *Jahannam*, *Kafir*) and its followers (Muslims), in order to understand how ideas relating to them get subverted by people (Muslims and non-Muslims) because of the space they have enjoyed in the public memosphere. A series of international events – the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the collapse of Soviet Union in 1990, the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in 1990s, the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York – brought unprecedented media attention to Islam and Muslims by the end of 20th century. Journalists, weary of Cold War propaganda and having newly discovered 24\*7 TV news technology, found a refreshing subject to hinge upon – Islam (Hadar, 1992). Not surprisingly, these events coincided with the publication of works like *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) by Samuel P Huntington, which further provided intellectual apparatus to globally stoke up hysteria against Muslims. During this period the long-drawn territorial conflicts, originally rooted in colonial histories involving Muslim communities like in the former Yugoslavia, Palestine and Chechnya were conveniently explained employing the dominant narrative of ‘radicalisation of Muslims’, and this ‘security danger from them’ in turn, justified the use of violent means to repress the demands of the natives. In otherwise complex and multi-faceted realities, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Turkey’s AKP party were mostly seen from one lens – the Islamic. Muslim countries have been found to be overrepresented amongst countries with high levels of violence (Gleditsch and Rudolfson, 2016). The negative portrayal of Muslims as extremist sympathisers, posing an ever-present threat of converting themselves into terrorists by practicing Jihad, has been studied extensively (Said, 1997; Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Burke, 2017). In this context, there have been several studies examining the representation of Muslims and the role of traditional media in erecting the ‘Green Peril’ (Hadar, 1992).

The researcher is not denying the shrewd exploitation and narrow interpretation of Islam by some Muslim leaders legitimised by the *Ulamas*, which has resulted in the considerable success of transnational religious movements like Salfism/Wahhabism. As demonstrated in the mutilation of the Buddha statue in Bamiyan by Taliban, the increasing persecution of Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Salafism has been found directly supporting and supplying arms to rebel groups in Mali, Syria and many other parts of the world (Moniquet, 2013). However, it is the relative proportion of the negative space Islam and Muslims have been assigned in the media, and how some state and non-state actors are conveniently used to represent the Muslims in general; which proves to be the very reason why everyday discursive practices representing everyday ideas of Muslims and non-Muslims need to be studied so that subversion in the dominant ideas through these everyday practices can be understood.

Additionally, a series of protests and bouts of violence across the world in the wake of the publication of the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (the founder of Islam) in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and in the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2011, created a perception that Muslims are lacking in modernity and have no sense of humour (Khan, 2016; Kuipers, 2011; Khanduri, 2015). However, this research provides evidence of the use of humour in everyday digital settings by Muslims, and therefore this work partly studies humour as a tool of subversion in the internet memes on Muslims memosphere(s) (Habermas, 1991). In the process, this work explores the potential function of humour as a communication tool: to subvert, resist and reinforce social, political, cultural, and religious ideas. This approach to exploring humour as a potential tool for reaction and resistance to the dominant discourses on Islam and Muslims, problematises the contested discourse on Muslims and humour. Humour is here being studied not just as a device of resistance to the others' Islamophobic narratives, but also as a challenge to the discourse of the *maulvis* within Islam. Subsequently, the study will traverse the emerging themes in humorous exchanges amongst Muslims. A lot of instances of this were found in the memes shared with #halalhumour on a myriad of topics like Hijab, Jihad, Salat; ideas which are otherwise considered serious within the religious circles. Consequently, this study is investigating how individuals who identify themselves as practising and believing Muslims constantly negotiate with their other (gender, caste, class, cultural, political, etc.) belief networks and in the process, subvert those ideas. In this sense, in order to understand religion and religiosity, this work engages with Niklas Luhmann's System Theory approach to religion as a system that is in constant interaction with its environment which consists of other religious belief systems, political systems, gender concepts, racial beliefs, etc. Therefore, studying religion as part of a social system which interacts with other sets of beliefs, is an approach that can help us understand how and why humour is created and received in the ways it is. This approach also helps us to not fall in the trap of the theories of the kind proposed by Samuel P. Huntington (*Clash of Civilisations*) where religions are looked at as constant, inorganic entities, entirely unrelated to other existing belief sets.

Sitting here in India as I write this, Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is complete, after 20 years of US-led western forces operation in the country in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the American twin towers. The global meme-sphere, especially Twitter, is yet again abuzz with hashtags and memes on Islam, Muslims, Sharia, Taliban, and related topics. Any event relating to Islam and Muslims for reasons – historical, religious, political, cultural – ignites immense passion amongst people often at extremes. Since the mainstream media has been mostly busy 'manufacturing consent' (Herman and Chomsky, 2010), selling wars (Pilger, 2010) and forwarding the commercial agenda (McChesney, 2008) of their masters; individual actors have exercised agency through technological tools like the internet. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram are not merely

popular applications of our times, these have come to define our everyday lives in very fundamental ways. This work investigates how producing and sharing memes have become a part of an everyday subversive cultural practice of digital natives wherein one can see a number of patterns – the existing ideas getting circulated, the ideas being challenged outrightly and new counter narratives taking shape.

In looking at internet memes in this sense, this study directly delves into four key areas of communication research – the medium (Internet memes as an instrument of subversion), the message (subversion in discourse on Islam and Muslims), the cultural practice (creative ensemble of linguistic and visual symbols) and its circulation (memetics and networks) – which together form a sizeable part of communication studies' kernel.

### 1.3. Research questions

Considering the above, this research asks the following two questions:

- *Research question 1 (RQ1):* If and how internet memes are subversive in the context of Islam and Muslims?
- *Research question 2 (RQ2):* What is the nature of interaction among various elements (image, text and context) of the internet memes on Islam and Muslims?

The approach to this research is pragmatic and mixed, containing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data has been gathered from Twitter, guided by the definition of a meme designed for this project, which includes both visuals superimposed with text, and popular hashtags related to Islam and Muslims. Since the goal of this research is to identify patterns of subversion in the internet memes, thematic analysis has been employed to qualitatively analyse the internet memes (visuals and/or text) as cultural artefacts representative of a mosaic of disparate (fundamentally different from each other not just in terms of their medium of origin, but also in their original narrative context) trans-medial elements coming together to express a set of ideas, drawing on

popular cultural symbols like cartoons, comics, music videos, advertisements, tv soaps, novels, and politics. Network analysis has been used to study the subversion in hashtags, which basically involves identifying the origin of the tweet and how its various derivatives have taken shape over time, how they have spread, and how the original and subversive derivatives are responding to external events on the subject.

#### 1.4. Original contribution

Subversion in memes, especially in the everyday context of digital users, remains an understudied subject, and has only gained currency in the last decade. Some recent studies on subversion of hashtags have used both qualitative as well as quantitative approaches. However, the process of subversion in hashtags has not been studied using network analysis. In this sense, this study originally contributes to the methodological paradigm of studying internet memes in the context of subversion in communication.

Also, examining everyday digital culture(s) (especially employing humour) stemming from self-narration and reflexivity of users in the context of Muslims and Islam is an understudied subject, as mostly the focus has been on 'their' representation by 'others'. This study strives to make a small contribution in this direction of enquiry foregrounding the everyday.

The intellectual bedrock of media and cultural studies, starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been fed through streams of studies on culture industry and mass culture (see for example, Benjamin, 2008; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, and others from the Frankfurt school), popular culture (see for example, Hall, 1981; Fiske, 1989), subaltern studies (see for example, Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1985; Chakrabarty, 2000) and the everyday culture (see for example, Williams, 2002, 1982; de Certeau, 1984; Scott, 1985). Despite the emphasis of scholars like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall on everyday aspects of culture, and with the exception of two seminal works: John Durham Peters's *Speaking into the Air* (1999) and Paddy Scannell's *Love and Communication* (2021), media scholars have largely shied away from examining culture through the frame of religion and religiosity, instead studying culture as a secular practice. The increasing attention of mass media on religion due to its growing role in international politics has resulted in a few studies on media and religion (see for example, Hoover and Lundby, 1997; de Vries and Weber, 2001; Lynch, Mitchell and Strhan, 2012; Mahan, 2014). However, this area has largely remained underexamined. The reason for this could be the fact that the media studies has been led by scholars rooted or trained in the Western knowledge traditions, that have mostly concerned themselves with critiquing ideological paradigms, like the Enlightenment, capitalism, modernity, colonialism, globalisation, gender, class, etc. In this context, this study contributes in analysing the digital impressions of lived religion and religiosity in the public sphere as an outcome of an individual's negotiation with religious dogmas and institutions.



## 1.5. Structure of the work

The first section of the work engages with the relevant literature in order to historically and culturally locate ideas as fundamental units of communication. Drawing from literature, ideas are then conceptualised as memes (copyable information) in the sense of Richard Dawkins's work. The work then moves onto envisaging memes/ideas as fundamental units of culture. Continuing the memetic approach, this work then progresses to debates on the gene-meme analogy, memes as viruses of mind, and memetics as social contagion leading to the concept of memeplexes. Further, it arrives at discussing the dynamic transmedial form and content of internet memes and related debates. Since the instrument to study subversion in ideas is internet memes on Islam and Muslims, this work problematises the concept of a believer by discussing religion and religiosity by engaging with Niklas Luhmann's System Theory approach and other debates on the subject.

The second section of the work introduces the data and methods used in order to find answers to the main research questions. It starts with introducing the concepts used in network analysis, and progresses to explain the use of social network analysis in this research. Further, it introduces and justifies the qualitative approach in using thematic analysis in order to study subversive patterns in the internet memes collected for the purpose of this research.

The third part, Results and Discussions, presents thematic and network analysis by connecting them with the larger global discourse on Islam and Muslims. The network analysis entails a critical analysis of 208,000 tweets examined using the actor (Twitter users) networks, hashtags' (dominant ideas and their respective subversions) networks, geographic analysis of users and hashtags (using geotagged tweets), and community and topic detection within networks. The qualitative analysis has been undertaken by parsing the data thematically based on the main subject of the meme.

This work culminates with a Conclusion section summarising major findings and placing them in the larger context, especially from the point of view of speculating what the future might hold for subversive memetic practices, and limitations of the work.

## 2. Review of Literature

The following section is reflective of the process of “discovering” previous works (Gibson and Brown, 2011, p4) and “concept development” (Strauss and Corbin, cited in Gibson and Brown, 2011, p4) apropos memes; and tracing related ideas in scholarly traditions often at loggerheads (mainly memetics and cultural studies) and subsequently moving to the concept, anatomy, and practice of internet memes. Since this work examines the internet memes on Islam and Muslims, it also engages, though briefly, with the institution of religion and its manifestation in the form of religiosity, especially in the context of ‘lived religions’. It also introduces the concepts of Islam necessary for (understanding) the subsequent analysis.

Thematically, this section is broadly divided into four main parts: Memetics, Internet Memes, and Religion and Religiosity.

### 2.1. Meme: Ideas that replicate

Memes are fundamentally conceived as idea units, and as such, they are rooted in human beings' unique capabilities for the generation, processing, and exchange of information. Ideas are argued to be fundamental constituents of culture. Consequently, memes are envisaged as units of culture. This section, therefore, engages with relevant works on memetics: human evolution and imitation, the importance of mimicry in human communication, the gene-meme analogy, and the conception of memes as viruses of the mind (mainly works of Richard Dawkins, Susan Blackmore, and Daniel Dennett) and social contagion theory (mainly Paul Marsden's work).

#### 2.1.1. Processing information: our unique heritage

The *primaeval soup* (Oparin and Synge, 1957) of life – stewing for billions of years – pregnant with possibilities of its future progeny and our ancestors the hominids, when one day would coalesce into organic life; life itself, maybe, was not aware what turn it was going to take.

At that moment, life was the only idea worth replicating. And it not just replicated, it slowly evolved into many other copies that were not identical. This proliferation of life led to the diverse flora

and the fauna we see around us. What is referred to here is the evolutionary theory originating in the works of Charles Darwin (2016[1859]) and Gregor Mendel (Olby, 2019). It is one amongst many speculative propositions on how life started on earth and how we have come to be.

Amidst all of this originated a species called *Homo sapiens* (Tattersall, 2019) which shared many traits with other life forms around it, and yet, displayed unique capabilities of individual and social learning (Despain, 2010). That species was us – our ancestors. This might sound banal today, this one fact – that we learn, is the sole driver behind everything we see around us. The fact that there is a set of common signs, using which one can talk to the other, making ideas manifest, using language through an electronic screen, is a testimony of human beings' immense ability to process simple information for complex ends. Therefore, it is safe to assume that our unique position on this earth is a result of the superimposition of our still ongoing genetic and cultural evolution (Tinbergen, 1977 cited in Delius, 2007). There has been significant evidence of individual and social learning in other species, of animals and birds, as well. However, the kind of sophistication that human beings have displayed in this regard is clearly unparalleled.

Of what we know so far, what makes human beings distinct from all other species is their ability for the conception, exchange, processing, and memorisation of information. And most importantly, the fact that we are self-conscious, i.e., we can observe our own thinking (Smith, 2017, para1). That we are self-aware, i.e., we know that we know (Smith, 2017, para1). Unfortunately, we cannot speculate much about other living organisms' self-consciousness because of the absence of common languages between them and human beings (Smith, 2017, para1).

We can receive information by observing, reading, listening, and imagining. Here information can be anything: how we talk, eat, etc. Imitation, especially at the nascent stages of growing up, has been found to have a basis in the cortical mirror neurons in the brain. Mirror neurons have been found to be the only brain cells that code both other people's and our own actions and therefore are essential for social interactions (Iacoboni, 2008, para5). Mirror neurons react to information received from other people and 'provide a direct feedback channel between people' (Pentland, 2010, p205). Marco Iacoboni (2008) in his book *The Mirror Neuron Revolution: Explaining What Makes Human Social*, illustrates experimentally how the mirror neurons help us internally experience our social world – i.e. experiences like simulation, imitation, empathy, and language – by sensing social signals in the forms of actions and feelings of others.

The mimicking behaviour in human beings has been found directly related to empathy and trust between individuals or members of the group taking part in social communication, so much so that group negotiations with high mimicry levels have been found to be more successful (Pentland, 2010, p207).

Alex Pentland (2010, p204) investigated the role of non-verbal signals in human communication and decision-making using data mining tools and drawing on data from electronic devices like electronic badges and smartphones. His conclusion was that roughly 40% of the variation in the response to social situations, like interviews, dating, etc, can be attributed to the role of non-verbal signals in social information processing. Referring to the works of Nobel laureates Daniel Kahneman and Herb Simon, Pentland (2010, p205, p206) elucidates two natures of the mind in this regard: the habitual mind and the attentive mind. The habitual mind is the one that functions automatically, subconsciously, and possibly was first to develop in early humans (Pentland, 2010, p206). Therefore, it is likely that the habitual mind is primarily responsible for reading simple social signs and signals engendering association-based learning (Pentland, 2010, p206). The attentive mind, on the other hand, was key for the superiority and fitness of human beings as we need a conscious mind to go beyond association-based learning. It is the attentive mind that is likely to be responsible for reasoning and abstract thinking, which possibly developed much later (Pentland, 2010, p206).



*Figure 7: Mathieu Shamavu poses for a photo with the orphaned gorillas Nkakazi and Ndeze.*  
(Image credit: Mathieu Shamavu/AP, The Guardian, 2019)

In Figure 7, the gorillas stand straight and look right into the camera, to pose for a selfie as an act of imitating humans (Maclean, 2019). The gorilla on the left can be seen leaning a little back and the one on the right can be seen to lean a little forward, both possibly in order to be at the centre of the frame. This is a common feature of human selfies, where people on the boundaries of the frame try to bring themselves inside it. One can imagine if other animals, whose brain is much less evolved than ours, can imitate so well just by observation, then the human brain must be, many a time, more sophisticated and efficient at imitation by observation.

This is useful from the point of view of assessing the role of free will and human agency, which is a remarkable feature of our conscious and attentive brain and has made us distinct from the rest of the animal world. In fact, it is this conscious brain and our agency that makes us practice altruism, cooperation, and self-sacrifice (Dawkins, 1976, 1995) of the kinds which are unknown in the animal kingdom. But in order to have a holistic view of how we come to synthesise and respond to the information we receive, we need to appreciate all aspects of our learning, including the possible role of subconscious brain activity.

When we process received information, it sometimes gives rise to new information with respect to the previous one. This could be by the way of addition, subtraction, or some form of revision in the original information. It might not be completely new information in the ideosphere. However, it is new with respect to the parent information. Sometimes, we relay a particular information without any change or processing. So, receiving and processing information comes naturally to us. But the question here should be: when we are surrounded by millions of signs, symbols, intonations, movements, ideas; how and on what basis do we come to imitate, endorse, revise, propagate some and reject others?

### 2.1.2. Information= ideas, signs, symbols, thoughts, practices

Information – cultural, religious, political, economic – has spread from time immemorial. From the stone tools by *Homo erectus* (Rightmire and Tobias, 2017, para23), to democracy as a political idea, which most modern states have agreed upon. The most fundamental to the most complex phenomena of our times can be reduced to information that caught the attention of a considerable number of people. Most cultural practices and their forms, like clothes, language, food, and music, can be reduced to information. These practices have arisen from a certain need resulting in ideas and their manifestation in a particular cultural form or practice. Any cultural practice can be dissected into a set of information that acts as its foundation stone. For example, a song is a set of

information coming from language, musical instruments, and the cultural history of a producer, and is reflected in its aesthetics, lyrics and music. Similarly, the clothing of a particular place is a set of information on weaving, dying, and tailoring; cuisines are a result of acquired information about fuel, edibles, recipes and traditions.

Information is everything. It is more fundamental than matter itself. This fascinating idea got momentum in the 20th century after the Bell Labs mathematician Claude Shannon (1948) proposed the Information theory which helped convert analogous messaging into bits of information. This was the first time that a message was being quantified as digital units of 0 and 1, based on George Boole's ideas in his work *The Law of Thoughts* (1854). One of the scholars who expounded the belief in the centrality of information in any ecosystem, is the famous evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins. Dawkins argued in his book *The Blind Watchmaker* (1991b, p112):

*“What lies at the heart of every living thing is not a fire, not a warm breath, not a ‘spark of life.’ It is information, words, instructions... If you want to understand life, don't think about vibrant, throbbing gels and ooze, think about information technology.”*

Jacques Monod (1970), the French biochemist and Nobel laureate has expressed similar ideas in his celebrated work *Chance and Necessity*. He imagined an abstract kingdom rising above the biosphere with ideas as its inhabitants. He envisaged that ideas have retained some properties of organisms in this kingdom. In his view ideas can breed, fuse to form complex structures, recombine and segregate their content, compete and evolve, just like organisms. He also pictured ideas being infectious or having the power to spread. The American neurobiologist and Nobel laureate Roger Wolcott Sperry too had a similar conceptualisation of ideas:

*“Ideas cause ideas and help evolve new ideas. They interact with each other and with other mental forces in the same brain, in neighbouring brains, and thanks to global communication, in far distant, foreign brains. And they also interact with the external surroundings to produce in toto a burst-wise advance in evolution that is far beyond anything to hit the evolutionary scene yet.”* (Platt, 1965, p82).

### 2.1.3. Individual and social learning = exchange of ideas = culture

Every day many of us are exposed to various ideas in our family, peer group, and of course the media. Maybe the ideas that we are exposed to at home are so long-term and formative that the kind of effects they show are more stable in comparison to other sources of ideas. Our language, food and other family traditions that we subconsciously inherit and imitate become part of our long-term memory. How do we come to retain some of them and totally reject others? What is it about ideas that it jumps from a machine or someone's brain and sits comfortably in our head? How do we tend to retain some of them even after a substantial number of years? This ability makes all the difference. Who we are today can be reduced to information we exchanged and retained during a lifetime of individual and social learning.

Therefore, one can argue that the study of human culture is primarily about which information evolved and how over thousands of years and what forms it acquired. If we then consider culture to be an assemblage of information, then what we are talking about here is the question of cultural evolution.

### 2.1.4. Memes: units of culture

The Oxford Dictionary defines a *mime* as “An element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means.” Going by this definition one can say that any idea around us which has replicated itself fairly successfully amongst a considerable number of people, can be imagined as a meme. A meme that might be successful with one section of people might not have currency with another. Success here is measured by the longevity and acceptability of information in the form of practices.

There are some memes that have come to have nearly universal popularity. Some of the successful memes of our times are the idea of God (especially one God), marriage, democracy, feminism, jeans, burger, and selfies. Then there is the other set of memes that are not universal but nonetheless remain popular with a section of people: monarchy, racism, terrorism, communism, authoritarianism. For example, communism, for a good part of the 20th century, was a fairly successful meme but gradually by the end of the 20th century lost traction.

Each of these memes has an array of memes associated with it. For example, the God meme is associated with other memes like heaven, hell, sin, virtue, Day of Judgement, Satan, charity, etc.



Similarly, the democracy meme is associated with memes like the right to choose, freedom of speech, social justice, individual liberty, fraternity, equality. One can imagine memes forming a cloud – a kind of meme-plex (Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 1999) where every meme is connected to many others and this association forms a network of ideas or memes. Dawkins argues that a meme’s survival prospects may increase by getting associated with other compatible memes and in this process of association, they mutually support each other (Jordan, 2014, para8).

Political, religious, and economic memes go hand in hand forging memeplexes (Jordan, 2014). For example, in the case of China, a group consisting of a political meme (one-party system), an economic meme (mixed economy) and a religious meme (atheism) go hand in hand. They together form a memeplex and feed into each other and increase the rate of their success. One can similarly think of other cases where a pool of memes goes together. Of course, it would not be true for all members of the group and there will always be outliers. So, in a way our political, cultural, and economic life can be seen as an ensemble of ‘memeplexes’, which in turn are made up of ideas. Therefore, memes as ideas can be conceived as units of our everyday culture and practices.

## 2.2. The Gene-Meme analogy

Richard Dawkins, for the first time in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* conceived the idea of memes or used the term ‘meme’. The book’s focus is not memes though. It centres on the immortality of the genetic material inside living organisms and the mechanisms through which this genetic material, or DNA, makes copies of itself. It richly demonstrates how the sole purpose of genes is to replicate themselves with high precision. He introduces the idea of a meme in the last leg of his book as a ‘didactic device’ (Dawkins, 2013) and as he says to ‘downplay’ (Dawkins, 2014) genes as the only replicating units. He speculates that the idea of ‘natural selection can work on any copyable information’ not just genes (Dawkins, 2013). In Dawkins’s view, whistling tunes, words, catchphrases – anything that has successfully passed on from one to the other, qualifies to be a meme.

He proposed this idea while contemplating the possibility of the existence of other evolutionary mechanisms in this universe in order to bring home the point that genetic material might not be the only immortal replicator in the Universe(s). He said that akin to Darwinian biological evolution, which bases itself on variation, selection and replication of genes, there can be other forms of



evolution based on natural selection that might exist in the universe. He speculated that as we are looking for possible lives on other planets, we might also find some other kinds of evolutions on our very own planet. And here he proposed the idea of a 'meme'. He speculated that like in animals and plants the genetic material makes copies of itself and survives for millions of years, similarly, ideas replicate themselves and survive through the generations.

He coined the term 'meme' from the Greek word 'mimeme', meaning 'that which is imitated'. He changed the word 'mimeme' to 'meme' for it to rhyme with the word 'gene'. A gene, which can be understood to be a constituent of DNA, is a physical and functional unit of heredity (National Institute of Health, 2019) in living organisms. He argued that as genes act as units of biological evolution, capable of duplicating themselves in bodies, which he termed 'survival machines', similarly memes are also units of cultural transmission and exchange, capable of replicating themselves in brains.

Dawkins replicated his gene-centred view of evolution to the evolution of ideas. The gene-centred view considers genes as units of selection in the case of biological evolution. Similarly, ideas can be seen as units of selection in cultural evolution. Dawkins called these selection units 'memes'. Consequently, Dawkins conceived memes as the cultural equivalent of genes. What is of importance here is that the gene and meme are not compared merely metaphorically but rather in a more nuanced sense, which Dawkins elaborated on in his later works. However, Dawkins also warned against stretching the analogy between memes and genes too far (Jordan, 2014). Jordan (2014) while talking about Dawkins' idea of memes notes that Dawkins has always been aware of the danger of reducing complex phenomena to simple models.

In order to understand memes from Dawkins's point of view we need to first understand some important characteristics of a gene, namely longevity, fecundity and fidelity. Longevity as the literal meaning of the word means something that lives for long. Dawkins (1976) explains that a gene in itself doesn't have a long life but the fact that it makes millions of copies of itself is a hallmark of its immortality. Fecundity is to do with the speed of replication and fidelity means the property of a gene to copy itself with accuracy. Dawkins claimed that all these characteristics which are central to a gene for it to be an immortal replicator could also be possibly present in a meme. The critics of Dawkins's idea of the meme have argued that there is no real comparison between a gene's and a meme's fidelity as the gene's ability to copy itself with accuracy is very high in comparison to the meme's, which tends to change themselves more often than not. In fact, this low fidelity of memes

is one of the major focal points of criticisms of Dawkins's idea. Dawkins (2014) defends it by arguing that if a meme is short and in a language that the sender and the receiver understand, then the fidelity will be very high. According to him, it is because of the sheer diversity in symbols current within the various human societies that a meme gets mutated at such a high rate.

Although he coined the term 'meme', Dawkins was not the first person to talk about parallels between biological and cultural evolution. Scientist Nikolass Tinbergen before him also discussed the superimposition of genetic evolution with cultural evolution (Delius, 2007).

Following up on Dawkins's ideas, Juan Delius (2007) in his essay on *The nature of culture* discusses the similarities and differences between genes and memes and observes that genes only come from parents whereas memes can come from anywhere in the environment. Also, memes reside in the brain and genes are the ones that guide the brain itself. Therefore, he argued, both memes and genes affect their hosts and memes depend on their host's genes. Contributing to this debate, philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett (1991) went on to propose that the human brain acts as a host to memes. According to him, the brain itself is a product of activity between the memes. Therefore, human consciousness can be seen as the outcome of the evolving process of this mimetic activity in the brain itself. There are a few other similarities between memes and genes that Delius (2007) draws our attention to, but going deeper into those aspects will not serve the purpose here for we have to arrive at some other destination.

Susan Blackmore (1999) in her book *The Meme Machine* wholly endorsed Dawkins's idea of memes (p.8) and went a step further to suggest that memes have a life of their own and are autonomous. According to her, they are not subservient to human beings; rather, we in our acts of imitation, act as their physical 'hosts'. According to her, memes like Dawkins's 'selfish gene' are 'selfish memes' - only interested in making their own copies. She says memes exist for their own good and human beings shouldn't mistake them as their creator. Blackmore (1999) also draws a parallel between the evolution of memes and Daniel Dennett's idea of conceiving biological evolution as an algorithm. Dennett (1995) has described Darwinian evolution as a set of steps or procedures which results in a certain outcome akin to an algorithm. In Blackmore's view, because memes follow the evolutionary algorithmic steps of variation, selection and retention, their life evolution can be understood as analogous to evolutionary algorithms. According to her, memes demonstrate variation as there are a whole lot of diverse memes (ideas) at a given point in time, selection as they compete for the host's attention and only a few get selected, and retention as the ones that get selected replicate themselves and form a heredity.

Kate Distin (2004) in her book *The Selfish Memes* argues against Dawkins, Dennett, and Blackmore's proposition of comparing memes with genes. She says unlike genes, which manifest themselves in an all too familiar organic form, memes are too wide, diverse, and scattered to really merit comparison with genes. She places consciousness, emotions, and beliefs, as a parallel system of meaning-making in the memetic sphere. In that sense, she conceives consciousness and emotions as mutually exclusive to genes and biology. Her thesis is that the interplay of memes and the environment they sustain and compete in, gives rise to new ideas and cultures. And that memes do not act independent of their hosts and environment.

Dawkins's idea of surmising a cultural evolution akin to the biological one has proved to be incredibly propitious for the field of memetics, especially in the context of the digital media age.

With rapid technological advancement, the concept that the place where memes live are human brain lost its traction. Dawkins bridged this transition and made some amendments to the original proposal of the *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He included computers and the internet in his meme hypothesis, adding that, "it was obviously predictable that manufactured electronic computers, too, would eventually play host to self-replicating patterns of information-meme." (2006, p329). He notes that the internet provides a perfect ecology for memes to replicate, as information is transmitted from one computer node to another through communication networks. He further proposed that the computer-led networked communication forming a web through dense connections, is a "perfect milieu for self-replicating programmes to flourish" (2006, p329).

Indeed, the era of the Internet and electronic message transfer systems was soon to transmogrify the way we interact and communicate. The Internet not only provided memes with a fertile medium to grow, it also flared the idea of memes itself. 'Meme' swiftly became an internet buzzword. This unforeseen development provided myriads of insights into the nature of memes, such as whether they are harmful, neutral, or beneficial.

### 2.3. Memes as viruses of the mind: the memetic approach

Some scholars have described meme behaviour as parasitic. Memes are posed as viruses of the mind. Dawkins (1976, 1991) also compared the spread of a meme with the spread of a virus. This view of memes has resulted in the memetic theory, which is also known as memetic epidemiology or contagious theory. According to which, once the meme viruses infect the mind, their sole aim is to perpetuate themselves, with the mind having little or no control over them. It is important to clarify that the term 'virus' does not carry a negative connotation here. A virus is anything foreign which is looking for a host in order to make copies of itself and therefore survive. They might harm, they might not harm, many a time they might live in a symbiotic relation in the host's body. In fact, Dawkins (1976, 1991) has consistently argued that genomes themselves should be regarded as colonies of viruses.

It is important to note that Dawkins's works, including *The Selfish Gene*, have not concentrated on human beings. He argued his case of 'selfish gene' or 'meme' for any living organism. In his book, he gives many examples of some behavioural characteristics of animals which cannot be explained through Darwinian evolution because those characteristics seem to harm or handicap those animals. Still, those animals have carried those traits from generation to generation, showing that what might seem maladaptive to us has some inherent advantage attached to it for the organism.

Dawkins cites examples to this effect, using Amotz Zahavi's (1975) work on mating and signalling in animals, where organisms have put themselves at a disadvantage. Zahavi is known for his 'Handicap Principle' according to which animals carry certain handicaps in order to gain an edge over others in the race to attract the attention of a potential female partner. He explains this by the presence of tail feathers in peacocks. Biologically, the long and colourful tail of a peacock is disadvantageous to its survival because it attracts predators, and it limits its flight in comparison to another peacock with a shorter and less burdensome (less attractive) tail. However, according to Zahavi, this attractive feature possessed by the peacock is a signal to the peahen that if the peacock can afford to carry the tail even at the cost of an external danger posed by it, then there must be some intrinsic strengths and qualities that it possesses in order to maintain this handicap at such a great cost. According to Dawkins (1991) and Zahavi (1975), these attract the peahen as it is looking for the best set of genes for its future offspring. How does this example suit a discussion on memes or ideas as viruses of the mind? Well, Dawkins says that there are ideas and practices which might come at great cost to the individual they are inhabiting, yet there may be an advantage that the inhibitor derives out of this difficulty.

While some memes can be clearly identified as having good or bad effects, there are some memes that show ambivalent behaviour. For example, memes associated with religion are traditionally considered to be beneficial to the mind that carries them, while some modern thinkers, like Karl Marx, thought that religion as an idea is detrimental to people's wellbeing. Some foreign memes, when imposed on a mind whose religious or political beliefs are different, may cause harm. For example, it is highly debated whether organised religions and political systems have proved to be beneficial or malicious for tribal societies whose social ethos are quite distinct from mainstream cultural practices. Susan Blackmore (2010) revised her original view of religion as a harmful virus after looking at the evidence for religion being beneficial to the people who practice it. She referred to data which points out how religious people live a happier life in comparison to secular people and advocated for a wider definition of a virus which also includes beneficial and symbiotic aspects (Blackmore, 2010).

There are all kinds of speculations as to how memes travel from mind to mind. Drawing a parallel between a cell's nucleus, the human mind and a computer programme, Dawkins in his 1991 essay *Viruses of the Mind* elucidated how all three provide a conducive and similar environment for a set of information to make copies of itself. He singles out two important qualities of a virus: its readiness to replicate itself and once copied, to obey the encoded instructions in the host's body. According to Dawkins, the mind viruses do not reach the accuracy of DNA or a computer virus during replication, but they do spread in gangs or packages of ideas, and the human mind provides a conducive environment for ideas to replicate themselves.

While elaborating this point, he explains that as the cellular machinery is pre-programmed to copy the DNA with accuracy, similarly the human child's brain has also learnt from centuries of evolution that its survival rate increases if it simply copies or follows the instructions given by its parents or elders. According to him, the children who copy or follow the information well given by their parents are the ones whose survival rates are higher. He argues, therefore, that over thousands of years of evolution, the child's mind has genetically been pre-programmed to copy information, and that that is the reason children are so gullible: because simply copying information is a survival technique for them.

Dawkins (1991) goes on to say that like "immune-deficient" patients, children are vulnerable to "mental infections". He illustrates this point with an example of an individual's faith in something without any visible evidence. According to him, the possessor of faith usually takes her belief as an inner conviction which does not require any proof. In fact, the believer might relate the lack of

evidence and corresponding mystery with the idea's high value, making it directly proportional to its inherent virtuosity. The previously discussed work by Alex Pentland (2010) on the direct relationship between level of mimicry and success in social communication also corroborates this.

Dawkins (1991) observes that it is a sign of a highly successful mind virus that it is self-referential and self-sustaining. Discussing the incredible gullibility of human minds for 'malignant infections', Dawkins remarks about the 'suicide mission virus' and desire to commit suicide in the line of faith. He supports his argument by citing the example of the infamous cult called Peoples' Temple, which was founded by one Reverend Jim Jones in the United States of America. In the incident of one of the largest mass deaths in American history, more than 900 followers of Peoples' Temple along with Jim Jones committed mass suicide in 'Jonestown', in the jungles of Guyana in 1978 (Eldrige, 2019). Although this is an example of an extreme magnitude and does not reflect the intent of believers at large, it is nonetheless of importance in terms of how ideas can push to actions which are considered absurd or against a person's own welfare. Here, the nature of the issue at hand is not moral, but practical. In fact, human history is a history of wars and conflicts. That is understandable to a large extent, but what is astonishing is to inflict self-harm of the magnitude of suicide in the hope of a future reward. However, this is not only true for religious cults or faith-based practices. History is replete with examples where people have blown themselves up for purely future political goals. For example, in 1991 the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a Sri Lankan, Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide bomber, who identified with the cause of a separate Tamil nation-state carved out of Sri Lanka.

#### 2.4. Countering the 'virus model': Jenkins's 'spreadable model'

Talking about the spreadability of memes and their viral behaviour, Henry Jenkins (2009) says that the extent of change and transformation of a meme in the networked culture is so high that it would not be right to compare it with the replication of genes, and that in doing so, we are failing to understand the everyday realities and complexities of the process of communication. He proposes an alternative to the 'virus model' to understand the spreadability of media in the context of the highly participatory nature of networked culture. His 'spreadable model' focuses on the consumers of the media, which according to him add value to the original message, allowing it to be 'localised' in accordance with the context of the consumer, media environments, texts and business models. Jenkins (2009) discusses two paradigms, namely 'spreadability' and 'stickiness', in the context of marketing, branding and communication. In his view, his model contrasts with the earlier works on spreadability of media which focused on the 'purity' and 'stickiness' of the message, indicating a centrally controlled view of distribution of media. According to him, in using

biological metaphors like ‘infection’ and ‘virus’ we are devoiding the consumers of any agency, and such a usage limits our ability to understand the complexity of the media. He further notes that such usage also indicates a certain set of traditional assumptions about the power relation between the producer, the text, and the consumer.

One can clearly see that Jenkins here is talking about the classical dichotomy between two schools in media studies: one, which started in the early 20th century against the backdrop of political propaganda wars, celebrating the all-powerful media (hypodermic needle, cultivation theory, etc.), and the other championing the active users or audience of the media, which came into the picture much later around the 1960s (users and gratification, reception theory, etc.). While lamenting that the language of memetics completely negates human agency, Jenkins (2009) argues that although people are surrounded by a variety of cultural artefacts, they also actively create culture by making choices. He further argues that the fact that only very few cultural practices survive over a long time, is not the result of the agency of that particular idea or cultural practice but the agency of individuals who make informed choices based on their local context.

## 2.5. Memetics and Social Contagion

Paul Marsden (1998) in a paper on social contagion research observed that memetics and social contagion are two sides of the same coin. The concept of social contagion was first propounded by French philosophers like James Mark Baldwin, Gabriel Tarde, and Gustave Le Bon (Marsden, 1998). According to social contagion theory, behaviour can spread like an epidemic with a mere social contact (Lindzey and Aronsson, 1985) from person to person or through mass media. Marsden argues that the contagious social transmission of ideas is not necessarily based on coercion and rationality. It is important to note that this definition of social contagion only includes observable behaviour, for example suicide or charity, not internal states like faith, altruism, etc. There are other definitions which also include beliefs and attitudes, though those are more difficult to study owing to their nature of being internal mental states. The studies of social contagion have been mainly centred around two major areas: emotional or attitudes contagion, and observable affect or behaviour contagion (Marsden, 1998). The behaviour contagion research has shown evidence for a variety of behaviours resulting from imitation: hysterical contagious, self-harm contagious, aggression contagious (riots and mob lynching), rule violation contagious, consumer

behaviour contagious (fashion and fads) and financial contagious (stock markets) (Marsden, 1998). Marsden goes on to observe that the social contagion research shows that we might want to believe in an autonomous human agency guided by rationality and having control over our actions, but sometimes that is not the case. Just as a biological infection and its spread are not in one's control, there is similarly evidence to suggest that we have little control over what we get culturally infected by and in consequently spreading it (Marsden, 1998).

Marsden laments the failure of social science to take the social contagion phenomenon into account partly due to a conceptual conflict between social contagion and Cartesian voluntarism. The spread of homogeneous ideas is often explained by the social sciences as conscious and wilful imitation (Marsden, 1998). For example, the Emergent Norm Theory, which explains the mob behaviour and bases itself on human rationality, states that the spread of a new and emergent social behaviour arises because of interactions between human collectives in response to an ambiguous situation or crisis (Marsden, 1998; Arthur, 2013). Similarly, the Social Learning theory by Albert Bandura (1971) emphasises the person's capacity to create self-regulating mechanisms and control their own behaviour while imitating ideas. Giving examples of these and other social science theories, Marsden critiques them by claiming that although these theories do explain the social contagion phenomenon to some extent, they do not account for emotional or hysterical contagion. According to Marsden (1998), the memetic paradigm, which he calls the 'memetic stance', has an ability to fill the gaps and provide a strong theoretical basis to the data pointing towards the imitation of irrational behaviour. He elaborates his concept of memetic stance by stating that human conditions operate in two sub-states: biological and social. He notes that the necessary condition for an 'evolutionary loop' – i.e., replication, variation, and selection – is present in both these states. Therefore, Marsden's memetic stance sees the evolutionary loop play out at both genetic and memetic level.

Marsden claims that this meme's-eye view explains the spread of irrational behaviour which tends to negate the importance of individual agency, and which can't be explained otherwise through the traditional social science theories. Marsden is in effect arguing that a 'selfish meme', like the 'selfish gene', only serves its own purpose and we should not try to understand it from the anthropocentric lens or an individual's lens. It is interesting to note here that Marsden's argument of 'selfish meme' comes very close to that of Dawkins's idea of 'selfish gene', wherein Dawkins (1976) argues that it is not for the species, group or an individual's benefit that natural selection happens, rather it is only for the end goal of a selfish gene, which is to replicate itself and make as many copies as possible. Dawkins has consistently argued against an anthropocentric view of natural selection,



and in that sense, Marsden is applying the same line of argument to argue that memes, ideas, beliefs, attitudes or behaviours do not replicate themselves to serve an individual or group; rather, the only purpose they have is to replicate themselves.

Therefore, in Dawkins and Marsden's view, when we identify a behaviour as irrational, what we are primarily saying is that the said behaviour appears irrational to us with reference to our parameters of rationality, and in doing so we are taking an anthropocentric view, and that is why we are facing difficulty in explaining those phenomena. According to Marsden, when we move away from an individual's or anthropocentric point of view to a 'meme's-eye' view while explaining the transmission of cultural instructions (memes), we ask questions like what is it about successful memes that makes them successful, instead of asking why certain individuals are immune to some memes while others catch them.

It is amply clear that Marsden advocates the marriage of memetics and social contagious research. He underlines how memetic studies can hugely benefit by using the social contagious research's epidemiological methodological tools and concepts. He further argues that this union provides a potential to make memetics a theoretically informed empirical discipline.

## 2.6. Epigenetics: the importance of the environment for memes

Beside the aforementioned discussions, many new concepts have invigorated the memetic debate to its core. Epigenetics is one such concept. 'Epi' means 'above' in Greek. Therefore, Epigenetics means how the environment of an organism impacts the expression of its genes above its genetic information (National Institute of Health, 2019). Here environment does not only mean physical environment but social as well. Before this finding, it was believed that only genes carry inheritable information which passes from generation to generation. However, the insights into epigenetics showed that some chemical-molecular changes which occur 'on' the DNA and not 'in' it can be inherited by future generations and therefore form part of the genetic memory (Chail and Akst, 2019, para1). It is because of this reason that studies have found that genetically identical twins show remarkable differences in observable features because of the epigenetic effects (Chail and Akst, 2019, para10).

This is a helpful discovery for understanding how human societies evolve, especially evolutionary biology and medical science, which until very recently relied too much on genes to explain things. In this sense it challenges the solely genetic explanation of important phenomena including cultural phenomena due to its emphasises on social conditioning as well. Through these recent discoveries we know that the phenotypes – the observable inherited characteristics (appearance and behaviour) which result from the interaction of the genotype and its environment (Scitable, 2014) – have an important role to play in human beings besides their genotype.

The researcher is of the view that, similarly, memes also compete with other memes and interact with their social, political, and cultural environment and mutate accordingly. For example – the greeting memes “Hi” and “Hello” have proved to be more successful in comparison to other greeting memes of our times, like “Marhaba”, “Salam”, “Namaste”, “Bonjour”. Could this be because of the domination of American cultural products in the cultural industry coupled with a long English colonial history? This example shows that there are strong historical, political and economic interactions that a successful meme result from. Another pertinent example of a meme which has gone viral in the recent past is the act of taking one’s own photograph called the ‘selfie’. The act itself is not new. People have been clicking their own photographs for a long-time using timers in the camera. But to understand the reasons for its popularity today one will have to take into account a variety of factors like the advent of smartphones with a front camera, user-friendly social media platforms, increased access to the internet, the increase in divorce rates and the rise in the number of people living as ‘singles’ (Day, 2013, para 12-14), and many other psychological and social reasons besides the technological factors.

## 2.7. Meme-plexes

A meme in a meme pool has to adapt to circumstances in order to survive and replicate successfully. There is a diversity of forms in which memes can replicate and express themselves. For example, religion, one of the ancient memes in existence, replicates in various forms such as words, art, craft, music, rituals, etc. This diversification results in an increased number of hosts or vectors or carriers of memes. Another strategy used by memes to enhance their chances of survival is the formation of a memplex. A memplex is a scenario in which several mutually compatible and complementary memes join forces and act as a combined unit. Dawkins (1976, 2013) compares a memplex to a gene-plex. He explains that genes in order to increase their survival collaborate with mutually compatible genes and form a gene-complex. He cites the example of an animal having genes for a particular type of teeth and genes for a specific type of gut as is the case in carnivores and herbivores (Dawkins, 2013). There is a whole package of genes that has specific

properties for forming teeth, legs, ear, guts, etc. of an herbivore, which will be distinctly different from a carnivore depending on their environmental needs.

Similarly, memes that want to graduate as successful memes, compete with one another for limited resources and the attention of the potential host by actively responding to and collaborating with its immediate environment. For example, during the early 16th century some memes of the Catholic Christianity memeplex responded to its environment and a new Protestant memeplex was created which ensured the survival of otherwise dying Catholic memes in some parts of the world. The researcher is not trying to attribute any agency, consciousness, or motive to 'ideas', 'memes' or 'genes' as if they were living creatures having the power to make decisions. The style of expression of the kind used in the above example is merely to understand the potential processes of meme transmission, reception, and exchange.

## 2.8. Internet Memes

One can safely say that memes originate and mature inside brains. Possibly after reaching a certain threshold maturity, they start looking for opportunities to replicate and make copies of themselves. To facilitate this process, two things are required: a vector (carrier) and a host. The brain acts as both progenitor and host for the memes. There have been a wide choice of vectors or carriers for memes, the most common being mimicry and language. Earlier they used to spread by word of mouth; however, with subsequent advancements they found new carriers, with a differentiation of time and space bias in the sense of Harold Innis's (1951) concept in *The Bias of Communication*, ranging from clay tablets, wall arts, parchments to books, optical disks, and electronic mails. Now they are spreading through communication towers and digital networks. They have mutated to several forms in order to increase their chance of survival. They may take the form of stories, arts, skills, legends, fashions, music, catch-phrases, rituals, etc. As rightly said by a cognitive scientist and philosopher, Daniel C. Dennett, a meme is an information-packet with an attitude. This information-packet with an attitude has yet again found a new carrier: **the internet meme**.

Following is the example (Figure 8) of a popular internet meme called 'Grandma Finds the Internet' and its derivatives. The original meme appeared on Reddit in 2011 (Know Your Meme, 2019).



Figure 8: Grandma Finds the Internet meme

The Internet with its vast complexity, enormous fertility, swift transmission, and extensive spatial coverage provides an ideal test bed to dig deeper into these idea units and use them to understand other ideas. Internet memes spread typically by email, social media, news, and many interactive platforms on the internet. Anastasia Denisova (2019) in her work on the internet memes called them ‘discursive weapons’ and ‘political mindbombs’ in the hands of users who use them to draw attention to news and opinions. However, she argues using the Russian-Crimea and US 2016 election cases that the internet meme traffic on a particular subject is directly related to the news agenda set by the mainstream media, and therefore internet memes only help trend and quickly deliver condensed packets of information akin to ‘fast food’ on a much larger scale. Internet memes have come to be considered such a potent tool in the present times that some governments have moved to pass legislation to contain their effect. The Russian government in 2015 passed a law which bans the use of doctored images of public figures. It is popularly known as *Russian Anti-meme Law*. This decision by the Russian government generated a huge response from the ‘meme community’. After this incident Putin’s photograph, which had been a popular meme in the past, came to be used even more with new derivatives. Figure 9 shows the two derivatives of the Putin meme.



Figure 9: Putin memes (Know Your Memes)

The use of famous personalities as an ‘image macro’ is quite a popular meme category. It is important to note that it is not the only kind of internet meme. There are many types of internet memes that are used as standalone memes but at the same time also used in combination with each other. Internet memes or its various elements can be:

- I. Acronym and Initialism. Part of internet slang so widely used that they have acquired the status of memes. For example, Lolz and Lol (Laughing out loud), RT, OMG, BRB. Initialism often carries meanings with its unique context. For example, SHM (Shaking my head) to convey disappointment, RTFM (Read the fucking manual) to respond to a newcomer who has not done her background research before expressing an opinion.
- II. Words. When part of internet slang, they acquire additional meanings, which can be indexed for example using a hashtag. For example, ‘Facepalm’ is used to express disappointment.
- III. Intentional misspellings, letter repetitions, phonetic translations.
- IV. Videos, for example the famous 2012 Korean music video *Gangnam Style*.
- V. Images.
- VI. Animated Graphic Interchange Format (GIF).
- VII. Audio.

Websites like Reddit and 4chan have played an instrumental role in catapulting internet memes into popular culture. In a very recent study on the dissemination and propagation of internet memes, Savvas Zannettou et al. (2018); processed over 100 million memes using a variety of methods and found that most of the memes were disseminated through Reddit and 4chan. They



found that the secret behind the success of some Internet memes over the others is their ability and readiness to mutate and create new offspring continuously (Zannettou et al., 2018). The same characteristics are also indicators of a gene's longevity and success in the natural selection process.

The result of another study conducted by Christian Bauckhage (2011) at University of Bonn concurs with the findings of Zannettou's studies about the monopoly of a few meme spreader platforms. Bauckhage found that in the case of the spread of internet memes, the internet shows a 'scale-free' property with homogenous sub-graphs of connectivity. According to Bauckhage (2011), his results demonstrated that internet memes spread through homogenous communities and social networks rather than the internet at large.

In 2014 when Mark Jordan, while writing an article on memes, searched for the word 'meme' on the internet, it produced 78,000,000 results. On 28th April 2019, when this researcher searched for it, the 'Google' search engine generated about 3,040,000,000 results. The increase in the number of web pages linked to memes is big and indicates the viral interest towards the phenomenon of memes (Figure 10).

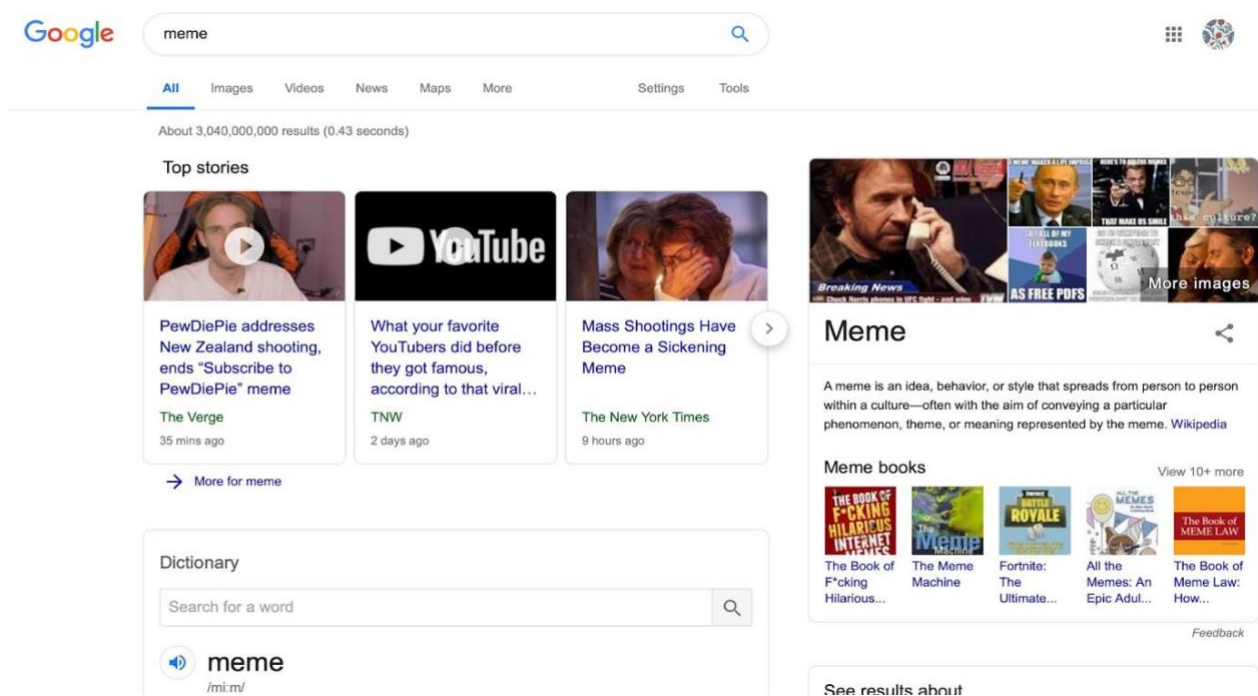


Figure 10: Google search result of word "meme" as on 28th April 2019

However, it is not the number of results that caught this writer's attention at first. If you look at the above screenshot taken at the time of conducting this search, you will notice that one of the top sections of the page under the rubric "Top Stories" shows a developing news story about the

link between two shootings. One was the Chabad of Poway synagogue shooting, which took place in California on 27 March 2019 and killed one person; the other – the Christchurch Mosque shooting in New Zealand on 15 March 2019, which killed 49 people. One of the listed stories in the result section from the New York Times (Figure 11) reports on the use of similar internet memes and spread platforms in these abhorrent acts of terror.



Figure 11: Misuse of spreadability of memes (Source: <https://nytimes.com>)

Both shooters had used popular meme spreading imageboard platforms – 4chan and 8chan – to live stream the shootings and share the shooter’s white supremacist manifestos. It is important to note here that their manifestos widely used ‘memetic elements’ (Romano, 2019). The Christchurch shooter’s manifesto made references to the following popular memes: *PewDiePie*, *Shitposting* and *Navy Seal Copy-pasta*. A part of the Christchurch shooting video, especially where the attacker, right before starting to shoot, utters “Remember lads, *subscribe to PewDiePie*”, was instantly circulated as a meme through various online platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. “*Subscribe to PewDiePie*” is a viral meme which has history in the subscriber war between the YouTube channels ‘T-series’ (an Indian music company) and ‘PewDiePie’ (a Swedish Youtuber).

The Chabad synagogue shooter’s manifesto was also dotted with similar memes and was shared on a similar image-based discussion board (Evans, 2019). This example of the use of memes for spreading hate speech and criminal ideologies tells us the importance of studying them.



## He is doing his part!

*Figure 12: An example of 'Subscribe to PewDiePie' meme using the 'Putin meme' (Source: <https://me.me>)*

The meme displayed in Figure 12 is an example of a new meme created out of the juxtaposition of two others: the *Putin meme* and the thematically incongruous meme *Subscribe to PewDiePie*. It is this creative mutation capacity (Dawkins, 1976) of an internet meme enabled by digital tools, where elements from completely different backgrounds are brought together to create a new artefact, that gives it the status it enjoys today in the online sphere.

While conducting a study on internet memes in the context of education and literacy, Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2006) found some interesting results which shed light on the spread of memes. One of the aims of their study was to test the features of a meme identified by Dawkins: replication, fecundity, fidelity and longevity. They presented the results in a book called *New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning*. They carried out the study on data collected for five years between 2001 and 2005 and found that the 'shelf-life' of an internet meme in a 'memetics sense' was low, meaning most memes in their data set could not spread in their original form and displayed a high mutation rate. However, they noted that it is the 'vehicle'



or the 'form' that changed, whereas the original 'meme/contagious idea' remained intact. The form or presentation of a meme was given 'idiosyncratic spins' by their new creators who made a change in the form yet kept the central idea of the meme intact. So, it was only the 'look' of the internet meme that changed. They found that the high mutation rate of the internet memes in their data was directly proportional to the fecundity feature. That is, the memes which were highly successful in creating offspring were the ones which were often changed by splicing, superimposing, reordering, etc. They also found that the memes with high fecundity shared three features in common: humour (satire, parody, absurdity, irony, wryness, etc.), rich intertextuality (cross reference to popular cultural events, artefacts, symbols, etc.) and juxtaposition (incongruous coupling of visual and other elements).

Bredley E Wiggins and G Bret Bower (2015) used Jenkins's idea of 'spreadable media' and took it further to propose the idea of 'emergent meme'. They revised Jenkin's (2013) idea of 'spreadable media' to mean original messages which have not been remixed or restyled in any way from any other message. According to them, the Internet meme goes through three stages in its memetic transformation: from spreadable media to emergent meme and finally to the meme. They define an Internet meme as a result of these three stages. According to them, internet memes are "spreadable media that have been remixed or parodied as emergent memes which are then iterated and spread online as memes" (2015, p1892). Their analysis of the internet memes was founded on the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens, which studies a social system by analysing both the structure and the agent. Drawing from Giddens's work, Wiggins and Bower (2015) argue that internet memes display dynamic structural duality, i.e., an interaction between the agent and the structure. Internet memes, according to them, display the agent-structure duality because one, they inherently carry instructions to remix and reproduce themselves, and second, at the same time exhibit the 'agential activity' needed for their reproduction. Their study was set in the tradition of investigating internet memes as artefacts of digital participatory culture. They cited three reasons for treating an internet meme as an artefact of digital participatory culture, namely physical virtuality (as it exists in the human mind as well as in digital space), social and cultural connection (offers information about the individuals and cultures that create it), and purposeful production and consumption.

Internet memes can be, and have been, approached in a variety of ways. One way is by describing their unique form, which is a creative media-mix of images, GIF clips, videos, text, graphics and

audio. In a way, a meme is a true representation of multi-media convergence thriving upon digital editing tools. The form does not only include the anatomy of the meme in terms of being a digital artefact but it also includes the language and style used in the meme. Moreover, the design or compositional elements are also an important part of the form of a meme. Popular definitions of an internet meme are mostly dominated by its form aspect. Some experts, looking at its rising popularity, have drawn a conclusion that this is a clear indication of the ‘decline of text’ and the ‘rise of visual culture’ on the internet (Manjoo, 2018).

How should we relate this to the above discussion on memes as idea units? For this work, memes have been originally conceived as basic idea units passed from generation to generation. Therefore, the internet memes’ form itself is not the meme, rather the form is merely a vector or vehicle which carries a particular idea. However, this shouldn’t be confused with the message in the form, which often cannot be separated from the main idea itself. The form has a language of itself, both visual and linguistic. For example, a discussion on the success of static image memes in comparison to video memes is a discussion primarily concerned with the vehicle or the medium. It is not a discussion on the visual language of the meme. However, a discussion on the type of image or type of video used in a meme is automatically also a discussion on the visual message of the meme. The language of the form can be a separate category in the analysis of memes, but it cannot be ignored. It is an important part of the overall meaning of an internet meme. Therefore, these elements can be understood as the payload of an aircraft. They represent the capacity and ability of the vector.

The other approach to internet memes, studies the content or the message. This message is the idea that this author has been talking about in the earlier discussions in this chapter. Vehicles may change but it is for the spread of the idea that the anatomy comes together. For example, the genotype-phenotype dichotomy in Darwinian evolution. The genes in an organism manifest themselves in the phenotype (observable features) resulting in the formation of the vehicle, which here is the body of an organism. However, the end goal is not to make the vehicle itself but to create a safe haven, the body, for the survival and further replication of those genes. Therefore, the body of an organism merely becomes a medium, which itself is created in the interaction of the genes with the environment to best suit the survival and replication of those genes. Similarly, it can be argued that the form of an internet meme is analogous to the phenotype, which only comes into existence by the interaction of an idea with its environment. And in this way, one can explain the unique form of internet memes where the ideas they carry might not be new, but how they are expressed in the ecology of the internet that has hugely been transformed to suit the survival of the ideas themselves. Moreover, the ideas exist in an ecology of other ideas which can

be interconnected and yet unique. It would be highly limiting to look at the internet meme as communicating a single idea in fact like any form of communication, it is an assemblage of diverse ideas which are sewed together to communicate another set of ideas.

Limor Shifman (2014) in her book *Memes in Digital Culture* advocates looking at memes as “groups of content items” rather than single idea entities. According to her, an internet meme is “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” Shifman proposes to study memes by dissecting them in three separate dimensions, namely: content, form and stance. While her definitions of form and content are consistent with what we have discussed until now, it is the concept of ‘stance’ that she adds to the existing literature on internet memes. She defines ‘stance’ as “...information memes convey about their own communication...”. She explains ‘stance’ as the position of the addresser in relation to the content and form, keeping in mind the addressee. Employing ideas from discourse and media studies, she further breaks down the ‘stance’ into three subdimensions: the first being Susan Phillips’s ‘participatory structures’, that is, who gets to participate basing on the point of view of structure and power questions; Erving Goffman’s concept of ‘keying’, pointing towards the tone and style of the communication; and Roman Jakobson’s concept of ‘communicative functions’ (Shifman, 2014). While expanding on the ‘communicative functions’ she explains Jakobson’s six functions of human communication: first, ‘referential communication’, that is, communication which refers to its context; second, ‘emotive’: communication that describes the addressers’ emotions; third, ‘conative’: communication aimed at the receiver of the communication; fourth, ‘phatic’: communication aimed at extending or discontinuing the communication; fifth, metalingual: aimed at agreeing on the codes used in communication; and last, ‘poetic’ communication, which expresses the aesthetics of the message. To the mind of this researcher, by adding the ‘stance’ aspect, Shifman, as she herself observes, brings elements of the study of memes as a discursive practice especially when it looks at the question of who gets to participate in this process of communicating through internet memes. The practice of treating internet memes as sites of discursive practices concerns itself with looking at the role of social structures, agency of individuals in creating messages afresh as well as resisting and subverting the ones which are in circulation through their creative agency.

### 2.8.1. Internet memes, Subversion and the Everyday

While it is useful to understand internet memes as idea units, these idea units are constructed by people. People who for a very long time were seen as ordinary individuals, mass, public, audience, in the classical academic literature, populating the critique of processes of industrialisation and modernisation; have arguably created a niche for themselves using modern technological formats like these. The internet, which is inhabited by the internet memes, has potentially given an unprecedented agency to individuals and therefore has been truly disruptive in challenging hierarchies. The significant penetration of smartphones, internet, and new media platforms, meant to exploit the users' labour in generating the free content (Fuchs, 2014) that sustains these platforms, has also in the process afforded an opportunity for people to use these tools to resist and subvert the dominant social and political apparatus. Individuals who have been seen as passive consumers in the project of enlightenment and modernisation (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) of industrial cultural products are using the platform and their labour in unscripted ways. In this sense, it is not a product of a commercial cultural industry or elite culture coming out of a set cultural product assembly line in tune with the popular ethos of society, its cultural norms, market logic, political correctness, etc. In fact, it is an unscripted form of creativity where the user amalgamates their "everyday" (de Certeau, 1984) with symbols and language of the elite as well as the popular cultural industry in order to challenge, resist and subvert them or other dominant ideas and symbols. In this sense, the act of creating and sharing internet memes can be seen as what Michel de Certeau (1984) describes as "...everyday pursuits" that "...establish relational tactics (a struggle for life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic)" and whose "...characteristically subtle logic...comes to light only in the details." Regarding Subjugation and Subversion, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1975) noted that the dominant culture never exists as a homogenous structure and is instead complex and layered. According to them the subordinate classes do not come in direct conflict with it but oppose it from within, often coexisting and negotiating with it.

The approach to understanding the process of how and why people construct, receive, and circulate ideas and practices in their everyday life, is part of the cultural studies gamut championed by the likes of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Michel de Certeau and James C. Scott, for whom culture was the way of life and not something that was restricted to the operas, theatre and museums. And for this tradition people were not mere receivers and consumers but active agents in making culture. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1975), in their seminal book *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth sub-cultures in post-war Britain* defined culture as "...the way social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted." (p11).

The everyday approach gives primacy to the lived experience over the top-down, all powerful models which had dominated the media studies in its initial years. It also critiques the Frankfurt School ideas rooted in pessimism about the working class and popular culture. The everyday approach celebrates the agency of an individual who creates fissures in the structures deeply entrenched in power and privilege in society and uses them to resist or subvert them in little yet significant ways. It gives weightage to the narrative which focuses on the individual as the one who ‘uses’ the media instead of being ‘used’ by it. In his work *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*, James C Scott (1985) describes *everyday* resistance in the context of subordinate groups and lower classes as one which is ‘not openly declared, unorganised, unsystematic, opportunistic, individual, self-indulgent, having no revolutionary consequences and is small scale’ (pp. 33-35).

For the purpose of this research Internet memes are envisaged as tools of subversion of ideas. The memes on Islam and Muslims have been analysed in order to understand how a particular idea is subverted and re-subverted. In that sense, a broad range of ideas are expected to be encountered, covering a whole spectrum, which includes ideas by people who either criticise Islam, Muslims or their lived practices including practicing Muslims who either criticise everyday lived practices of Muslims belonging to theological schools other than their own or practices which they consider orthodox or innovative within their own followed theological school in Islam, as well as by people (Muslims and non-Muslims) who challenge anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim ideologies. Certainly, a polarised view of internet memes on Islam and Muslims that either supports or confronts Islam and Muslims, will not do justice to the complexity of the subversive spectrum. In fact, the assumption itself needs to be problematised that there exists a dominant view or ideology which in turn is getting subverted by another marginalised view, as this assumption will not only be too simplistic but will not help us appreciate the complexity of the creative ideaspheres. A lot happens in-between these two extremes in terms of subversive practices. For example, women in Iran have been using social media to protest the mandatory hijab law that the government of Iran has mandated in the name of Islam. Now this is an example of subversion from within the community. Moreover, the non-Muslims might look at Islam and Muslims as a monolith; however, there is a whole gamut of competing ideas and practices within Islam which get subverted from within. Of course, not to mention the increase in attention to Islam and Muslims after the end of Cold War and September 11 acting as a fountain of anti-Islam, anti-Muslim narratives.

The question of subversion is also the question of morality. In the sense in subverting ideas, practices or institutions, individuals make a judgement about what is right and wrong in their own ideasphere. The realisation of subjugation and exploitation is rooted in a world-view different from the one we wish to subvert and vice-versa and therefore it is not a one-way street. Often when we think of

subversion we think of two parties out of which one is powerful either on account of state privileges, class, gender, etc. and the other is powerless. While we almost always have unequal power equations in day-to-day transactions based on historicity, gender, race, ethnicity, etc., they are not absolute. Moreover, the definitions of concepts like subjugation, liberation, freedom, empowerment, civilised, barbic are also culture-centric and therefore highly contested. Therefore, on platforms like social media what we find is interminable subversion and counter-subversion loops. Tom Boland (2018) in his work, *The Subversion of Subversion: Critique unto Infinity in the 'social' media*, based on the digital ethnography of content on social media platforms, talks about the indefinite and infinite process of critiquing and subverting ideas on social media. He argues that any critique using the tools of critical ontology makes an assumption warped in self-righteousness of a clearly stated opposing ideological stance by institutions of power, hegemony and oppression, and that this might not be the case as the process of critiquing and subverting remains a liminal process ever stuck in a loop of subversion and counter-subversion, each side claiming the truth and in the process subverting the truth-claims made by the 'other'. In judging and counter-judging, both sides use words which have a deeper meaning in the context in which they have been used. Boland (2018), using the works of Turner (1969, 1985), argues that sometimes this critical discourse and subversive practices on social media, which he terms a 'cacophony of critique', can be constant without any hope of resolution rendering the entire process to "vacuity of subversion". This loop of subversion and counter-subversion, often played out in online echo-chambers, makes it difficult to clearly delineate the original form from the subverted or to clearly differentiate subversion from the original. However, to reduce these loops of subversion and counter-subversions as purely vacuous won't be right as they do perform functions in their own context. But to attribute any universal value or power to them will likewise be incorrect. For example, in the context of this study the individuals who critique Islam and Muslims would often use terms like 'peaceful'(alluding to Islam as a religion of peace and 'peaceful' referring to its followers), 'woke', 'liberal', 'secular', as invectives, whereas the opposite side would use terms like 'Bhaktis', 'Sanskrit' (these are Hindi words mainly used in India), etc. as an insult for the opposing party. Although both sets of words in their original meaning have positive connotations, they are employed in a context and manner laced with sarcasm that subverts their original meaning. Both sides have reappropriated these words to meet their own subversive goals, and from the sheer number of people who use them on a daily basis it looks like they serve a meaningful memetic purpose of communicating ideas effectively. We can understand it through another example which has a more global reach: the use of "Black Lives Matter" as a hashtag to highlight the injustice meted out to Black people and its reappropriation by other by counter-subverting it into "All Lives Matter" to accuse the people using "Black Lives Matter" hashtag of parochial and communal ideas.

Astride Peterle (2009) in her work, *Thinking Through Subversion in the Time of its Impossibility*, while discussing various interpretations of the term subversion, argues that subversion is not something that the constructor of the message designs, rather, it takes place at the level of the receiver. She stresses that the subversion happens in the act of perceiving it instead of being inherent in the cultural product. And in this way according to her the process of subversion can be seen as “...an act of shifting hegemonic meanings and codes.” The ‘shifting hegemonic meanings’ are the keywords here arguing that there is no singular hegemonic meaning to the text and that the user interprets and subverts it at her own end. Peterle’s work also gives power to the individual over the creator or the medium. However, it would be interesting to see how the messages which are overtly stating their ideological position in terms of supporting or opposing an idea, are subverted in their meanings at the individual level.

De Lawe (1983), in his paper *Oppression, Subversion and Self-Expression in Daily Life* argues for the ability of an ordinary individual to creatively subvert the established order. He argues that subversive culture arises out of a conflict between heritage culture handed down by the dominant institutions of the society as opposed to the lived cultures. While talking about the everyday context of the working class people manifesting itself through macro models of living and working conditions, production, consumption, use of space, especially in urban-industrial towns as the scene of oppression exhibited through structures like technology and ideology, he concludes that individuals through self-expression create a “scene of hope and rebellion...and of “new departures of cultures” (1983, p362) displaying originality in order to subtly disrupt and divert the dominant agenda. He describes this phenomenon of creatively negotiating and escaping power structures in the everyday cultural context as “subversive” (1983, p362) and as a “source of all changes” (1983, p362) leading individuals who act as active participants to subvert the dominant material and social conditions by employing their creative potentials.

However, it would be useful to look at ideas of scholars who have questioned the processes of agency of individuals, knowledge creation, and critiqued the discourse, power and hegemony and challenged common sense assumptions about them. The works of Michele Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and Edward Said would be useful in this sense. Foucault (1978) argues in his *History of Sexuality* with regard to the Repressive Hypothesis and sexuality, power and knowledge that the belief that sexuality was liberated in the late 20th century in comparison to being repressed by the capitalist forces is not right. He argued that the forces of modernisation have shaped and sanctioned a particular discourse on sexuality which is legitimised using science and knowledge and might seem empowering but in reality, has enabled the powerful to “deploy” that discourse in the way they wish without using power in the typical sense of repression or force. This argument by Foucault is much in alignment with Gramsci’s

(1971) idea of Hegemony, where he thinks that hegemonic ideas become part of “common sense” amongst the people who follow them without any need for those ideas to be enforced, rather, people are happy to follow them of their own accord as they see no possible alternative. Foucault’s idea of power is also not top-down but all-pervasive and, like Gramsci’s hegemony, working through the various social and cultural institutions. Edward Said (1995) in his much-celebrated work *Orientalism* argues the same about power and discourse in the context of how the westerners shaped the discourse on the cultures of the east. How are these ideas of Foucault, Gramsci and Said helpful to understand our own subject of internet memes as discursive practice in the context of subversion and resistance? Principally, the argument that Foucault and Gramsci are making is that the discursive practices that might come across as liberating may not be so because the mere presence of a discourse does not establish anything useful with regard to its nature. In fact, when one looks closer at the discursive practice, then one might see that it is merely forwarding the agenda of the powerful. For example, the social media platforms provide unparalleled opportunities for both Muslims and non-Muslims to discuss Islam; however, that does not necessarily mean that they are sites of subversion and resistance to the dominant ideologies.

It is also important to note that in the context of commodity culture, popular subversive practices also carry a market value (Butler, 2011) and therefore become an end in themselves going beyond the original purpose of subversion itself. As Jack Zipes (2012) notes in his work *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, subversion reveals to us the ‘stunning truths that we try to avoid’. Therefore, studying subversion might be a window into our own worlds that we avoid.

### 2.8.2. Humour in internet memes: a tactical device

Internet memes are primarily humorously packaged messages. They represent the everyday digital humorous content, widely circulated on digital media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

Humour is an important device in the tactical and subversive apparatus of internet memes. Humour is mostly seen as something which is harmless, and which should not be taken seriously. Therefore, use of humour can also be made to disguise ideas that are difficult to overtly vocalise. It does not pose an open challenge to the authorities and therefore avoids inviting attention. Everyday humour may be understood as an act of *everyday* resistance, in the tradition of Mikhail Bakhtin (1971).

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his work *Rabelais and His World* (1971), has enunciated the potential of humour in creating an intersection between the ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ by breaking prevailing boundaries,



hierarchies, norms and prohibitions, which is otherwise impossible in everyday life. Both Bakhtin and Scott point towards the potential of humour as an important apparatus of the subordinate classes and marginal groups for deviance. George J. Kunnath (2006) in his paper *Becoming a Naxalite in rural Bihar: Class struggle and its Contradictions*, describes the use of black humour by Dalits to get around, negotiate, undermine, and subvert the class-based power structures. Henri Bergson has also analysed the social and shared character of humour and pointed to the use of humour as a device for social control and correctiveness (Raskin, 2008).

Humour has been mainly studied through the lens of Philosophy (Aristotle, Kant and Hobbes) and Psychology (Freud and Bergson). Scholars have time and again talked about the difficulties in framing a comprehensive theory of humour (Straus, 2014). The Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, Relief Theory and Play Theory are some of the major theories in the field (Raskin, 2008). Incongruity theory explains the causality of humour. According to it, when the outcome or reality of a particular situation is not in accordance with the logical expectation, or is incongruent with the established norms and patterns, it results in humour. Immanuel Kant (1724- 1804), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), are some of the philosophers whose ideas on humour agree with the causality attributed to humour by Incongruity theory (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Humour, 2016). The Superiority theory, on the other hand, believes that the process of humour involves a sense of superiority on part of the producer of the joke about himself and a sense of inferiority about the one who is the subject of that joke (Monro, 2010). Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was one of the key developers of the Superiority theory (Morreall, 2020). Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) views were in sync with the Relief theory of humour according to which humour's primary purpose is to provide "relief" and fissures in otherwise very constrained environments (Monro, 2010). The English philosopher/sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1930) was amongst the first sociologists to discuss laughter and humour. His analysis of humour can be placed under the tradition of relief theory as laughter to him was "the discharge of arrested feelings into the muscular system...in the absence of other adequate channels" (Raskin, 2008). The Play theory suggest that humour involves physical and cognitive play akin to tickling and laughter, and that is why it is enjoyable. The Play theory has roots in biological evolution approach (Boyd, 2004). One can find many examples of humour in everyday life, where the explanation of more than one humour theory applies. Often these theories seem to work complementary to each other. Humour as a device of subversion has been observed as an important part of the data collected for this research. The use of humour is evident in both the visual and the hashtag memes selected for this work.

### 2.8.3. Internet memes and transmediality

The first few ideas that crop up in this researcher's mind trying to visualise the Internet memes are disparate images superimposed with text. Not only because they are a digital ensemble of diverse ideas from novels, comics, movies, TV soaps, sports, news broadcast, and other media but also because they represent transmedia storytelling techniques which foregrounds people's everyday lives. This is what, drawing from Giddens's work, Wiggins and Bower (2015) suggested, is the tradition of internet memes as artefacts of digital participatory culture rooted in structure-agent duality. It is this act of communication through means like the internet memes which is 'fundamental to human experience of being in the world' and stories through which we construct and communicate who we consider 'us' and 'others' (Bacon, 2021) that is central to this idea. Scholars have pointed out the challenges of defining the contours of Transmediality given its multiplicities and pluralities (Jenkins, 2019; Freeman and Gambarato, 2019; Bacon, 2021). Although the term itself was first used by Marsha Kinder (1991) in a sense of cross-media content and platforms, Jenkins expanded it further in his book *Convergence Culture* (2006). He observes transmedia storytelling techniques as practices where not just the characters from different formats are used in a new way but undertaking storytelling using an entire 'other' 'fictional worlds and narratives' (Jenkins, 2006, 2019).

The whole of these trans-medial entities – the meme, is greater than their sum. The 'trans-medial storytelling' results from 'complex interaction of interdependent stories' (Freeman and Gambarato, 2019) enabled by digital platforms. Most memes thrive on the use of signs and symbols from disparate popular cultures rooted in a variety of religions, nations, cultural practice- films, TV, video games, music, celebrities, fashion styles, cartoons, etc. The differences in the elements are not merely superficial but the unique properties of each of these elements are central to the narrative of the trans-medial product itself (Freeman and Gambarato, 2019). In order to analyse the nature of interaction among the various elements of internet memes, namely images, text and context of the memes, it is important to understand the references from the diverse media – comics, novels, video games, television, films. There are a number of terms – intertextuality, intermediality, convergence, transcreation, crossmedia, multiplatform and then transmedia (storytelling) (Newman, 2012) – in circulation for this inter movement of currents within media.

Since transmediality is a broad and flexible concept (Jenkins, 2019; Freeman and Gambarato, 2020, p384), for the purpose of this research, it is taken to concern itself with memes that use diverse, multimodal, cross-media forms and contexts. The whole of these transmedial entities – the meme, is looked at not just as an assemblage of diverse media in one space but, as Sabry (2021) proposes,

in a 'relational way' in the sense of Heidegger's 'relational totality of involvements', wherein '*equipment-whole*' and '*involvement-whole*' are considered central for its understanding. Sabry argues that any analysis on transmedial material cannot be realised "outside media's main telos: communication." That means a transmedia product needs to be understood under the umbrella of 'human communication' and its basic purpose of 'disclosing' and 'discovering' – in the context of interaction between the screen media, non-screen media, their everyday contexts – "in-order- to" and "for-the-sake of-which" human communication functions.

Sabry (2021) points towards the "conjunctional and inextricably linked" elements of transmedia resulting in "messiness, non-linearity, trans-temporality and ambivalence...". Therefore, in order to deal with these complex products, this research would endeavour to identify them in their original context and then analyse them in their new habitus. It is important to note that although a lot of legacy and contemporary popular culture imagery is borrowed by the online memetic culture, it has its own unique set of popular signs, symbols, and language. Exploring the form would also mean deciphering this coded language created and used by the netizens. These complex forms do not easily make themselves discernible and are not 'commonly communicated' (Branch and Philips, 2018).

## 2.9. Religion and religiosity

To the researcher's mind, in order to understand how religion as a central subject of internet memes gets mediated, one also needs to examine the nature of religion as a social institution, and how it interacts with an individual's agency especially manifesting itself in religiosity; and the individual's agency potential to mediate on ideas with regard to everyday religion.

Ninety six years after the abolition of the Islamic Ottoman Caliphate in 1922 (The Economist, 1924), and the recent resurrection of the so-called Caliphate by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2014 (BBC, 2015); 39 years after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1978-79 (Afary, 2018); 28 years after the formal end of Cold War in 1991 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018); 18 years after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre by al-Qaeda (Bergen, 2018); with the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia (BBC, 2017), the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 (Trager, Youssef and Dunne, 2016) after the "Arab Spring" of 2011 (Letourneau, 2016); after the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Gravers, 2015), and of Hindu nationalism in India (Juergensmeyer, 2017); today in 2021 with the resurrection of the Taliban, we need to revisit and update the scholarly work on the role of religion in shaping our everyday cultural world(s), both at social and individual levels.

The researcher is of the view that religion, whether one's own or others', whether one inhabits a theocratic or a secular country, independent of our gender, race, class, caste, or politics, directly or indirectly has come to have a significant bearing on our lives. According to the Pew Research Centre's analysis (2017), more than 80 countries out of 190 favour one religion officially or unofficially.

This is not to evoke a paranoia of the kinds expounded by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington (1997) in his work *Clash of Civilisations*. The goal of summoning these examples is only to underline the need to understand religion, not just from the institutional-theological perspective (top-down approach), but also by investigating a series of questions. What meaning(s) do people draw in religious concepts and practices (bottom-up approach)? How does religion get digitally manifested in the everyday? How does it interact with an individual's agency? How does it network with other social institutions? How is religion used as a tool of solidarity to resist popular ideas? Especially against the backdrop of the residue of colonialism, the revival of nationalism and international processes like globalisation and liberalisation.

This chapter makes a case for religion to be seen primarily as a communication tool, creating, and circulating ideas, concerning matters from an individual's everyday life and activities to more social subjects, from ethics, morality, and politics, to the metaphysical. It explores the nature of the relationship between religion and communication by partly locating it within Niklas Luhmann's (1986) system theory approach.

Consequently, it argues that although religion constructs and communicates essentialised roles for its believers, an individual's agency of meaning-making constantly interacts with an array of belief assemblages besides the ones offered by the religion's belief set, resulting in a hybridised outcome, often incongruent with the envisaged perfect picture of a believer, or the one portrayed by stereotypes. In that sense, this work problematizes the conception of a believer, and thus her actions in response to events conflicting with her religious beliefs.

Further, this chapter underlines the need for understanding the role of emotions in experiencing and articulating religion and religiosity. It argues that emotions remain at the heart of understanding the web of belief networks through which a constant negotiation takes place between a believer's belief sets (arising from his immediate and mediated socio-cultural-political environment(s)), and the organised set of beliefs religion offers. It traces the social and psychological functionality of religious communication in basic emotions and beliefs thus formed. The chapter's arguments culminate into, considering that religious practices have a social – need and exchange value for an individual, proposing the role and scope of religiosity as a potent tool to realise social wellbeing.

In essence, this chapter establishes religion and religiosity as a continuous communication project, entailing constant meaning-making industry, both at an individual as well as at a social group level. Now the question from the McLuhanian (1964) point of view is whether religion is the medium or the message or both. If communication is taken as the process of exchange of meanings between individuals through common symbols (Gordon, 2021), then religion and religiosity certainly qualify. Religion, attended in this way, is primarily a process of communication between individuals and social groups, who share common signs, symbols, and its meanings; and consequently, identify themselves with a religious identity (*Aqidah*)<sup>8</sup>.

8 *Aqidah* is an Arabic word which in Islamic parlance refers to the creed of the people who believe in the following articles of faith: God, angels, prophets, scriptures, and the Day of Judgement. Although these remain the essential beliefs in Islam, there are additions to this in the case of some sects within Islam. For example, Shia *Aqidah* also includes designated Imams, etc. (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018)

Creating ('revealing', in religious parlance), interpreting, and exchanging meanings concerning a mosaic of subjects including the unfathomable idea of the unseen providence called God, birth, life after death (*Jannah*<sup>9</sup> -*Jahannam*<sup>10</sup>), injustice, suffering, aging, illness, vagaries of nature, etc.; through sacred books, lives and traditions of prophets (*Hadith*<sup>11</sup>) and their first disciples (*Sahaba*<sup>12</sup>), a reservoir of anecdotal stories; remains at the heart of practising religion.

As Luhmann (1986) puts it, religion communicates ideas and abstractions about the “observable” and the “unobservable” universe. An individual and the group; through this shared awareness, guided by religion, about the material and immaterial; are in constant communication with each other and the larger world. For example, in Islam a believer is expected to indulge in an act by first assessing it through a detailed hierarchy of concepts (regarding the classification of acts) as- compulsory (*Fard*<sup>13</sup>), recommended (*Mustahabb*<sup>14</sup>), permissible (*Mubāh*<sup>15</sup>), hated (*Makruh*<sup>16</sup>), prohibited (*Harām*<sup>17</sup>). This is a shared belief, originating from religion, which runs across believing Muslims (Hewer and Anderson, 2006). To cite another example of such shared beliefs: the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoon controversy, although originating in Denmark, led to protests in and by many countries (BBC, 2005) and groups all over the world (CNN, 2006) because of a common strand of belief, shared by numerous Muslims, that prohibits any pictorial depiction, including favourable ones, of the Prophet of Islam, in fear of it leading to idolatry (Chicago Tribune, 2006). Many Muslims equate any depiction of Prophet Muhammad with blasphemy (Gordon, 2010), as the idea of one God (*Tawhid*<sup>18</sup>) – the pivot on which Islam is believed to rest, forbids idol worshipping, which was being practiced in Mecca at the time of inception of Islam (Berkey, 2003).

9 Jannah is a word used in the Quran which means ‘the paradise or the Garden (of Eden)’ (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003).

10 Jahannam is a Quranic word which describes Hell: a place of eternal fire. Al-Nar is another term used in the Quran to describe this (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003).

11 The Arabic word Hadith describes the sayings, acts and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, which are considered only second to the Quran as a source of beliefs in Islam (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003).

12 Sahaba in Islamic parlance refers to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 2003). They had an important role in Islamic history and theology as they were the primary authors of the Hadith, and after the death of the Prophet Muhammad assumed the leadership of Muslims: Caliphate. Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali were Sahabas, who went on to become the first four Caliphs of Islam respectively

13 Fard, also called Wajib, refers to duties which are considered absolutely obligatory for Muslims. This includes the five daily prayers, zakāt (charitable contribution from an individual’s income), fasting during Ramadān (the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, ordained as a fasting month in the Quran) (The Oxford Encyclopedia of Legal History, 2009).

14 Also known as Mandub, Mustahabb are acts in Islamic belief system which are recommended but are not considered punishable if not carried out and therefore are not obligatory (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018).

15 According to the Islamic belief system, an act which is Mubah is neither obligatory nor recommended. It is permissible and Islam takes a neutral view on that act (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018).

16 Makrus are those acts which are despised and disapproved of in light of the Islamic belief system (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018).

17 Harām are the acts which are strictly prohibited in Islam (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018).

18 Tawhid refers to faith in the oneness of God. It represents absolute monotheism. Sufis interpret Tawhid differently which is in contradiction from the likes of eighteenth-century Arabian reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), who denounced any form of intercession between an individual and God (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018).

Be it the controversies around Taslima Nasreen (a Bangladeshi writer living in exile because of her controversial writings, perceived by many as being against Islam) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018), or Salman Rushdie (an Indian-born British writer, whose book *Satanic Verses* led to protests by Muslims in many parts of the globe and a fatwa by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran) (Osborne, 2016), or Charlie Hebdo (the French satirical magazine at the heart of the Prophet Muhammad cartoon controversy) (BBC, 2015), modern history is replete with examples where issues emanating in one region have traversed the geographical boundaries and led to a collective outrage which some see as “transnational Islam” (Linjakumpu, 2010).

Of course, although not entirely needless to say, there are Muslims who support the right of newspapers to publish Prophet Muhammad’s illustrations (Guardian, 2013) and are as steadfast in their endorsement of the freedom of speech and expression as anyone else. Unfortunately, often this fact gets buried in the spiral of silence, leading to the stereotyping of Muslims. The researcher does not necessarily support the idea of absolute freedom of speech and expression which is divorced from local cultures, norms and traditions; at the same time, one has to be cautious in positing this logic, as this argument is often used by authoritarian states to legitimise the denial of basic human rights to individuals (O’Connor, 2014).

The Religious Landscape Study (2014) conducted by the Pew Research Centre affirms that the number of people who consider religion a source of moral guidance has increased across religions by 4 % (from 29% to 33%) since they last conducted the study in 2007.

Other than the messages in the sacred scripture (‘word of God’ in religious parlance) and their interpretation through theological texts, the various rites, conventions, practices, and traditions become performative tools of communication demarcating the contours of religious beliefs. For example, the Shia sect, which is the second major strand of Islam after the Sunni sect (Pew Research Centre, 2009), defines itself not just through its faith in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, which remain at the root of Islamic faith, but also through the events at the Battle of Karbala, which are believed to have taken place in 680 AD in *Mubarram* (the first month in the Islamic calendar), where Shias believe Hussain ibn Ali (Prophet Muhammad's grandson popularly known as Imam Hussain), and his family were martyred by the then Caliph Yazid ibn Muawiya of the Umayyad dynasty (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). This collective memory and stories relating to this event, is central to Shia faith (Nakash, 1993).

Therefore, communicating the importance of this martyrdom and mourning on the Day of *Ashura*<sup>19</sup> during *Mubarram* remains at the heart of Shiaism (Nakash, 1993). The reader will be reminded of this example later in the chapter to underline the importance of events in religious belief systems.

Time and again, sociologists have encountered difficulty in arriving at a common and fixed definition of the concept of religion (Beckford, 2003; Nuti, 2013). There is a general recognition that any such definition can only exist within a specific context, and for a particular period (Nuti, 2013). Since the very nature of Abrahamic/monotheistic religions is different from the variety of other theistic belief systems that find themselves enlisted under the rubric of religion (Bloch, 2008), it is important to mention that for the purpose of this chapter religion means monotheistic religion.

Also, it is important to highlight the difference between the concepts of religion, religiosity, and religious rituals and practices, for the purpose of this study. Religion can be understood to constitute the institutional apparatus and organised system of meanings (Pace, 2011) assigned historically to a dogmatic belief system which entails sacred book(s), prophets, messengers, and ideas enshrined in theological texts. Religion in this sense is also a belief set which claims to be divine, pure, truthful, authentic, consistent, complete, and distinct (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). The history of religions is fraught with more than one organised system of meanings vying for legitimacy, leading to ever-growing diversity of schools within a religion; however, getting into this debate is beyond the scope of this study.

Religiosity would mean an individual or a community's endeavours and acts to acquire, understand, embrace, reject, resist, interpret, subvert, and practise ideas arising out of religion and its theology. Religious practices and rituals here are seen as enactments of an individual's expression of the sacred (Pace, 2011), which might be at variance with the organised system of meanings attributed to religion. Therefore, the researcher conceptualises religiosity as a lived practice as opposed to an absolute religious dogmatic belief set in antiquity. In the same spirit, making a case for studying religion from a broader lens, Nancy Ammerman (2015) calls it a "lived religion", representing itself through everyday practices. Following are a few examples from online digital media platforms using religion and humour in everyday settings.

<sup>19</sup> *Ashura* stands for the tenth day in the Islamic month of *Mubarram*, which commemorates the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein ibn Ali. On this day the Shia community re-enacts the tragedy through a series of performative rituals (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018).



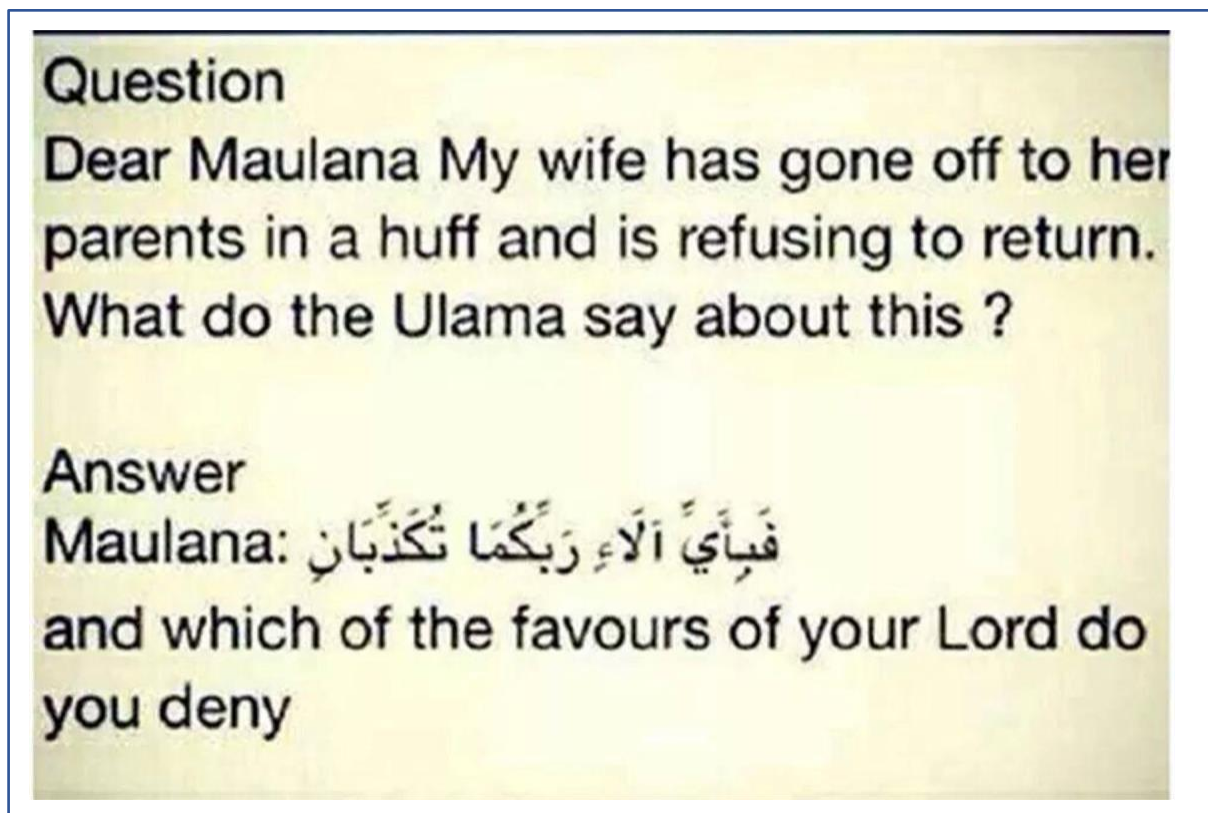


Figure 13: Humour using religious motif (Twitter)

The above joke (Figure 13) has been constructed using the motif from the Quranic verse *Surat ar-Rahman*. The line from the verse “...and which of the favours of your Lord do you deny” originally appears in the context of Heaven (*Jannah*) and Hell (*Jahannam*); this joke, however, has used them to communicate the everyday banter between a husband and a wife. This can be understood as an example of using an idea, which is solemn and meditative from a religious point of view, in an entirely playful and impish way. It is an illustration of “lived religion” to the researcher’s mind.

Blumer (1969) argued against any definitive conceptualization of religion in favour of a more synthesised understanding, entailing social actors and religious actions. The constant dialectics between the dogma and innovation provide agency to the believer for improvisation. More importantly, for the researcher, the concept of religiosity underlines an individual’s agency exercised through the interaction between a mosaic of belief sets arising not just out of religious doctrines but also other belief systems stemming from an individual’s immediate geographical, cultural, social, and political context. Consequently, religiosity is a dynamic expression of religion resulting in syncretism, hybridisation, heterogeneity, and inclusivity in response to changes in other spheres of life and society. It is this dynamic expression which also manifests itself through

various cultural – literary, musical, pictorial, and spoken – communication forms like humour. According to Berger (2011), earlier religion constructed a “prescriptive universe of reference” in relation to the sacred, but now, increasingly, individuals are drawing their own meanings towards the sacred using that prescription. Although religion claims itself to be the only truth and forms binaries of good and evil or right and wrong, religiosity, on the other hand, is a result of constant communication and negotiation between religion and its environment.

### 2.9.1. Religion- from an essentialist to a pluralistic approach

In religion, human beings have found reasoning and answers for the unfathomable questions about life, nature, natural calamities, the universe, and most importantly death. Therefore, networks formed through religion act as important communication channels guiding an individual and community through various stages and decisions spanning the whole lifetime. From birth, through marriage and to death; religion communicates ritual and spiritual practices. And in the process, the ideas given by religion get moulded to new realities, through expressions in religiosity in accordance with an individual's other belief networks. Therefore, the religious beliefs of an individual are constantly in communication with the other socio-politico-cultural belief networks that he inhabits (Luhmann, 1995), forming a unique cocktail of beliefs and attitudes, which shares similarity with other followers of that religion and yet has a different shade.

This reasoning leads us to look at religious individuals and communities as exercising autonomy, and not being merely a monolithic block of people. This approach moves away from an essentialist definition of religion towards one which is more pluralist and heuristic (Lambert, 1991). This perspective helps us avoid falling in the trap of dichotomies like orthodox-modern, secular-religious, liberal-conservative, progressive-primordial, fundamentalist-advanced, etc.

The earliest studies on religion, by sociologists like Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim, applied the evolutionist approach to understand the beginning of religion, wherein they associated a man's primitive thinking to concepts like magic and totem, as forms of religion (Filoramo; cited in Pace, 2011). The secularisation theories forecasted that as the world will modernise and differentiate, the importance of religion will gradually recede in society (Ammerman, 2014). But even after thousands of years of evolution, much modernisation and sophisticated differentiation in society, magic and totem remain, religion remains.

According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Centre on Religion and Public Life (2015), 53% of Americans believed religion was “very important” in their lives. 89% of them affirmed

their belief in God or a universal spirit, of which 63% (Muslims – 84%, Christians – 74%, Hindus – 41%, Jews – 37%, Buddhists – 29%) saying they had an “absolute belief” that God exists. Roughly seven in ten Americans (72%) said they believed in Heaven (Christians – 85%, Muslims – 89%, Hindus – 48%, Buddhists – 47%, Jews – 40%). Interestingly, these figures are not replicated with respect to the belief in Hell: only six in ten (58%) believe in the concept of Hell. What does that indicate about the agency of an individual? Do people tend to believe in ideas that suit them better?

Although used with caution, the example from the United States of America is of importance, because it certainly is one of the most modern (in terms of industrialisation) countries in today’s world, and therefore, goes on to show that modernity does not necessarily lead societies away from religion. Also, unfortunately, similar studies employing systematic and reliable methods are not available from other societies. Hence, the choice of an American-based study does not entail that it is considered a benchmark or a microcosm of the world. The researcher is acutely aware of the diverse, complex, and multi-layered societies which exist in Asia, Africa, and South America. At the same time, the researcher is mindful of the dangers which “numbers” are fraught with, and that numbers can conceal more than they reveal. Thus, the above numbers are only used as a complement to other more qualitative sources of knowledge.

Recent studies on the beliefs and attitudes in religion have shown that religious beliefs co-exists with and within modern processes based on science and rationality (Pace, 2011). In that sense, my proposition draws from the social action and social behaviour approach of Max Weber. In this regard, it delves into the structure-agency debates by critically informing itself through the interaction between religion (as a social structure) and believer (as a human agent). This theoretical approach moves away from the monocausal functional-structuralist approach in social sciences and humanities, which has come to dominate mainstream narratives on religion, and which attributes a believer’s actions entirely to the religion-theology complex.

The Weberian methodology, on the other hand, is not monocausal. Rather, it relies on an interactive, multitudinal, and subjective approach (*Verstehen*<sup>20</sup>) which looks at how religious ideas, beliefs, and values interact with socio-cultural beliefs, and how then they influence an individual’s and groups’ behaviour.

20 Verstehen in sociology is an approach which emphasises giving agency to the actor and making him/her the subject of study rather than an object of the researcher’s observation. This method moves away from the positivist tradition which looks at an individual merely as a product of its environment. The Verstehen approach emphasises the meaning-making capacity of an individual by interacting with its environment (Ray, 2007).

Religions, which have long claimed to be uniform, consistent, and unvarying, also find themselves significantly shaped by the local cultures and traditions (Pace, 2011). For example, the Sufi tradition in South Asian Islam is based on the concepts of *Silsila* (continuous link), *Vasila* (source), and *Peer-o-murshid* (mentor), which is significantly at variance with the Islam practiced in the Arabian Peninsula (now tilted towards *Salafism*<sup>21</sup>) and has drawn a significant part of its practice from the Hindu traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

Like other socialisation processes, religion has not been explored much in terms of having an important role in sketching the “cognitive map” of an individual (Pace, 2011). In fact, some scholars argue that to be religious is very much a part of being social, and lies at the heart of *Homo sapiens* being social animals (Bloch, 2008).

In a paper published by the Royal Society, Maurice Bloch (2008) advances the idea of “indissoluble unity” between being social and religious. He reasons that there is nothing unique about religion, and that it is yet another example of human social organisation (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). It is in “imagining in the everyday” – a proclivity unique to human beings, that Bloch (2008) finds the basis of religion, and he calls it “transcendental social”. The “transcendental”, according to Bloch, consists of the essentialised roles and groups. Essentialised role is the rights and duties ascribed to an individual who is assigned to an imagined identity (Andersen, 1991).

In the case of religion, this role is expected of a believer. Religions prescribe essentialised roles and groups to their believers. An individual might not have met the other members of this imagined transcendental group, but still identifies with them (Anderson, 1991). An example is the idea of *Umma* (originating from *Umm*, literally meaning ‘mother’ in Arabic) in Islam, which basically refers to the world-wide community of Muslims (Suellentrop, 2001), or all Muslims identifying themselves as one community, akin to the children of one mother.

21 Salafism literally means ‘like-Salaf’. Salaf in Arabic stands for ancestors. Therefore, Salafism refers to a group of revivalist movements in Islam which tried to fastidiously follow the ways and traditions of Salaf besides the Quran. Salafism is often associated with Wahhabism and is believed to have influenced it (Wagemakers, 2016). Saudi Arabia among many other countries endorses this version of Islam.

Religious practices can be located as a subsystem in an individual's sphere of social reality, constituting the person's ideas and beliefs (Golozubov, 2014). The view of religion as a subsystem draws on the long sociological tradition of studying social institutions as elementary parts of an ecological whole, called the social system (Parsons 1968, Luhmann 1986). The social system, thus, can be understood as a network of interconnected elements, such as religion, family, caste, class, culture, and language. These parts constantly influence each other through direct and indirect interactions. It is these interactions which make this whole exercise primarily a set of personal and social communication practices, wherein signs and meanings are formed, ascribed, derived, and interpreted. Religiosity as a set of beliefs and practices, interacts with its social environment, and both influence each other. Therefore, religion and religiosity form primarily, an ecology of dogmatic and inventive ideas, old and new, which are not just set in theology, but are as much based on an individual's real, and perceived, contemporary world.

### 2.9.2. Religion and communication: a system theory approach

Niklas Luhmann (1986, 1995), a noted sociologist of the 20th century, expounded the theory of autopoietic social and psychic systems (Seidl, 2004). Autopoiesis refers to a self-sustaining system which is in constructive interaction with its environment. Autopoiesis is a biological science concept, which Luhmann (1986) applied in the social sciences, mainly sociology and psychology (Seidl, 2004). As life is central to a biological living system, analogously, communication acts as life for any given social system (Seidl, 2004). Similarly, consciousness or thoughts act as the primary basis for psychic systems. Social systems do not have material elements, like the molecules in the case of living systems. According to Luhmann (1986), social systems reproduce themselves using communication through meanings drawn from 'momentary events', which act as their primary elements. Therefore, for a social system to sustain itself, it must constantly and recursively produce or reinvent these "communicative events" through a network of communication (Luhmann, 1986). In this sense, Luhmann (1986) gives a temporality to the system. He also, deontologised the concept of an element in a social system, showing that it does not have an existence of its own, and that it exists only in relation to the other elements as part of a system and thus, "...elements are constituted by the systems that are composed of them." (Luhmann 1995, p. 215). In this way, an element gets its identity and existence only in the process of being used and integrated as a part of the system. He considered religion as one of the important autonomous autopoietic sub-systems in this highly differentiated modern society. Now, let us recollect the example of observing *Ashura* in the Islamic month of Muharram. It is this event and the meanings drawn from it, that give life

to the Shia faith system. Although the Battle of Karbala is believed to have taken place in 680 AD in modern-day Iraq, this event keeps reinventing itself when parallels are drawn in the case of any attack, real or perceived, on Shias anywhere, especially by the Sunni countries (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018), including Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon and Iran (Shia majority theocratic country). Often, the contemporary conflicts that Iran is part of in the Middle East power-games, like in Syria, Iraq, Southern Lebanon (through Hezbollah), and Palestine, are constructed as the battle between good and evil, true Muslim and false Muslim, etc., using symbolic motifs, and drawing parallels from the Battle of Karbala (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018). Similarly, based on the *Torah*, the Jewish story of the brutal slavery under the Pharaoh in ancient Egypt and the Exodus of Jews led by Moses, is a symbol and metaphor widely used and reused by Jews to understand, reconcile, and communicate their sense of community and identity (BBC, 2009), especially through the prosecution faced by the Jewish population throughout history.

Luhmann (1986, 1995) envisioned the process of communication as tripartite: consisting of information (the content), utterance (form and purpose) and understanding (interpretation). He has underlined the significance of “understanding” over “information” and “utterance” in the process of communication, and in that sense, departed from the mechanistic models like that of Shannon (1948) of early and mid-20th century, which were narrow and myopic in not having given any agency to the receiver. In these early models, all power rested with the sender. In “understanding” lies the meaning-making potentiality of the receiver. This is also called the “principle of hermeneutics” (Baecker, 2001). As noted above, Luhmann propounded psychic systems alongside social systems. Unlike social systems, psychic systems are individual based. Obviously, all social systems automatically entail many psychic systems but communication as a primary element cannot be attributed to an individual psychic system. It can only be attributed to a social system, as communication is a truly social process (Seidl, 2004). According to Luhmann (1995), it will take an interaction between at least two psychic systems to have an element of communication in it. Therefore, although psychic systems are part of the communication process, communication itself cannot be understood as a product of any one psychic system. Communication only comes into being through the social interaction of these psychic systems (Luhmann, 1995; Seidl, 2004). In Luhmann’s conception of communication, the psychic system influences the social system, but the communication that ensues as a product of this interaction is an entity independent of any psychic system. It has a life of its own and is therefore, unique, as it can only come into being in a social system. Hence, communication according to Luhmann, is an amalgamation of three elements: information, utterance and understanding. The acceptance or rejection of this “understanding” by the receiver is quite distinct from the process of “understanding” itself (Seidl, 2004). It is the act of “selection” by acceptance or rejection of the

“understanding” (a resultant of the first part of the communication process), which gives life to the next “communicative event”, leading to a production and reproduction of these communicative events which makes this network of communication(s) dynamic, potent and autonomous (Luhmann, 1995; Siedl, 2004). How should we translate this understanding to the idea of religion and communication? For one, this conception of communication challenges the power that has been traditionally conferred to religious opinion leaders. It calls into question the dichotomy that is often created between the “ignorant” mass and “informed” opinion leaders. For example, the imams, the popes, and the priests are believed to wield the power to change public opinion. Their points of view, a lot of time narrow, are constantly projected by the mainstream media as a sample of the opinion of the community to which that opinion leader (psychic system) belongs. System theory confronts this postulation. Second, it further strengthens the previous point made in favour of a pluralistic approach to religion. For instance, in India before every election the political parties seek endorsements from religious leaders, who are believed to exercise complete authority over the followers of that faith. This happens across religions, including the religion of the majority – Hinduism, but in a much-fragmented way due the very nature of Hindu communities. But this assumption becomes paramount in the case of Muslims in India. On most occasions, the Shahi Imam of the historic *Jama Masjid* in Delhi finds politicians scrambling for his attention and endorsement as the “community’s electoral choice” (The Economic Times, 2014). An important point in favour of the argument made above is to note that there is no evidence of the fruitfulness of such endorsements in the past.

### 2.9.3. Social systems and psychic systems: a marriage at the heart of communication

Now let us bring to the concept of the social system the important element of the psychic system, and look at the interaction between the two and the role of an individual in this process of communication. This will help us locate the communication networks between religion (a social sub-system), individuals (the psychic systems) and society. In Luhmann’s (1986, 1995) approach a “person” represents an organic (biological) and psychic system (thoughts and consciousness). A “person” is not a system in himself but is a constituent of a social system (Luhmann, 1986). Just as social systems are based on meaning-constructing communicative events – entailing the creation of meaning through “understanding” and the eventual selection (acceptance or rejection) of that “understanding”, psychic systems also create meanings using thoughts and consciousness (Luhmann, 1995). No two psychic systems have direct access to each other, in the sense that no two individuals can truly guess what is going on in the other’s mind (Seidl, 2004). Psychic systems interact with each other through social systems. Psychic and social systems mutually create the environment for each other, and structurally pair and influence each other. Luhmann (1986) calls

this process of mingling between the psychic and social system “interpenetration”, wherein parts of the other system are treated like one’s own. It is impossible for social systems to exist without psychic systems (Seidl, 2004). Among the various stages of a communicative event in a social system, namely information-utterance-understanding-selection, “information” can be generated by the social system itself, but the “utterance” necessarily requires a psychic system (Seidl, 2004). The communicative event, according to Luhmann (1995), would not be complete without “understanding”. “Utterance”, in itself, does not complete the process of communication. It is only with the meaning-making at the level of the receiver, that a communicative event is accomplished (Seidl, 2004). For every communicative event in the ecology of social system, there has to be a parallel event in the psychic system (Seidl, 2004). Memory as a site of collection of past communicative events is intrinsic to psychic systems (Seidl, 2004). In this way as well, any social system depends on the psychic system to produce new communicative events using the past ones. For example, the Charlie Hebdo cartoons case in 2006, where the satirical magazine caricatured Prophet Muhammad, echoed the narratives of the Danish Jylland-Posten cartoon controversy of 2005, where 12 editorials cartoons depicting Muhammad were published (Veninga, 2016). The social system which created the “information” on Muslims being offended and their Islamic religious doctrines and beliefs being violated through these cartoons was further fed by the memory of a similar incident in the past, which was a residual in psychic systems and a result of a previous communicative event in a social system.

By now, one thing is clear: in order to understand how religion mediates everyday communication at the level of a psychic and social system, one needs to understand the role of the intrinsic psychological phenomenon of emotions, their role in establishing and shaping beliefs, and how they influence everyday religious discourse and religiosity. It is important to underline here that the act of studying emotions is not indicative of positivist reductionism hinging upon biological psychology or cognitive psychology. Rather, the need to acknowledge the contribution of emotions in religiosity and religious discourse is just the opposite. It is to have a constructivist approach, wherein a discourse and its forms are seen arising from a multitude of factors, as opposed to a monocausal approach. Be it the fatwas against Salman Rushdie and the consequent ban on his *Satanic Verses* in many countries including India, or the ruckus created by many in India on Maqbool Fida Husain’s paintings of Hindu gods due to which he now lives in a self-imposed exile, or the Jylland-Posten and Charlie Hebdo cartoon controversies. In all these cases, the believers (Muslims and Hindus in this case) alleged their religious “feelings”, “sentiments” and “beliefs” being hurt. Hence, it is not just the reception of the message that gets cast by the emotions of the believers, but also the resultant discourse that this reception generates, which in turn gets influenced by these reactions and at the same time constructs new discourses based on the memories of these



communicative events, in the processing playing out a psychic- social system matrix.

While cultural studies in general and Luhmann's system theory's emphasis on 'meaning-making' represent an anthropogenic approach to understanding reality, scholars like Bruno Latour and Michel Callon have focused on the role of non-human and material entities alongside human beings in shaping social realities (Johannesson and Baerenholdt, 2009). Bruno Latour in his work *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2007) demonstrates the limiting scope of the anthropogenic approach in studying the 'social' and argues for a 'sociology of associations', as opposed to, a 'sociology of social'.

According to him, the separation between the natural, cultural, and material realms handicaps us in understanding the 'world of actualities' (Jones, 2009). He argues against the taxonomical modern approach on structure-agency, and nature-culture dualism (Jones, 2009). This is also known as Actor- Network Theory, wherein the definition of 'actor' is not limited to humans, and even extends to inanimate objects. Therefore, Latour proposes the alternative term 'actant' in order to de-centre human agency and its role in explaining phenomena.

This chapter started with conceptualising memes as idea units. It discussed two major relevant frameworks, the first one – the memetic framework, inspired by evolutionary biology and epidemiology in looking at memes as genes and viruses of the mind having independent agency. And the other one, inspired by the trans-medial framework, including Henry Jenkins's (2013) concept of 'spreadable' and 'sticky' media, and the rise of digital participatory cultures; firmly placing users at the centre. It then highlighted and discussed the importance of studying religion in everyday cultural practice, and of problematising the essentialised roles ascribed to believers.

### 3. Research strategy, data, and methods

The approach to this research is pragmatic and mixed containing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data has been gathered from Twitter guided by the definition of meme designed for this project, including visuals superimposed with text and popular hashtags related to Islam and Muslims. Since the goal of this research is to identify patterns of subversion in the internet memes – Thematic Analysis (TA) has been employed to qualitatively analyse the internet memes (visuals and/or text) as cultural artefacts representative of a mosaic of (fundamentally different from each other not just in terms of their medium of origin but also in their original narrative context) trans-medial elements coming together to express a set of ideas, drawing themselves from popular cultural symbols like cartoons, comics, music videos, advertisements, tv soaps, novels, and politics. The subversion in hashtags means identifying the origin of the tweet and how its various derivatives have taken shape over time, how have they spread and how the original and subversive derivatives are responding to external events on the subject. The Network Analysis has been employed to study the hashtag memes.

It is important to underline here that, this researcher believes that any quantitative approach applied to a particular work can't be realised without ultimately qualitatively engaging and complementing the insights provided by the quantitative design, as a result, the use of the quantitative approach in this research, has been thoroughly guided by the preliminary manual, qualitative assessment of the Twitter data field that led to a choice of the sample set for quantitative data collection from Twitter. Furthermore, it is these insights gained from the collected and processed big data (using network analysis) that then helped the researcher to identify emerging themes in networks which led this work to further qualitatively analyse the prominent themes revealed through the engendered networks by once again manually searching for data on its use and context in order to further qualitatively analyse the findings in a more nuanced fashion. Therefore, at the level of analysis, the researcher has, back and forth, made use of the qualitative and quantitative approaches in case of both the network analysis as well as the thematic analysis. This amalgamation of the quantitative and qualitative approaches is finally culminating in the conclusion chapter.

### 3.1. Data

#### A. Data Universe

Any internet meme which broadly relates to Islam or Muslims or both, constitutes the data universe for the proposed analysis. That means internet meme which either uses the terms Islam or Muslims or both or makes a mention of or is related to any of its text, prophets, festivals, rituals, tradition, history, politics, etc. The data universe does not include or exclude any internet meme based on the declared identity of the Twitter user who has shared it. As a result, it includes a diverse set of internet memes on Islam and Muslims.

#### B. Internet meme

For the purpose of this research, an internet meme is defined in two ways. One for the purpose of Thematic Analysis and the other for the purpose of Network Analysis keeping in mind the research objectives. A static image or text or a combination of both will qualify to be an internet meme for the purpose of Thematic Analysis. These are typical internet memes that we see being circulated on social media. These would be the primary unit of analysis for understanding patterns (themes) of subversion in memes using Thematic Analysis.

The second type is the text accompanied with a symbol “#” called the Hashtag, is also treated as a meme (Weng, 2014). Twitter hashtags, by virtue of their character and usage, render themselves ideal candidates to be considered as memes. In digital parlance, hashtags are used to facilitate indexing and search operations. A piece of information can be looked up using the hashtags. Hence, a hashtag encapsulates a piece of information within itself as well as carries other information packets with them, which can be easily looked up, shared and modified. Hashtags are identified as excellent sites to observe memetic activity.

Internet memes have been conceived as idea units for analysis of memes. In Internet parlance, a meme usually refers to variants of an image, video, graphic, text, cliché, etc. often incorporating an element of humour. These memes are propagated on the internet through various social network platforms and blog sites. Internet memes are a little different from the ordinary memes conceptualised by Dawkins (1976). Although they exhibit most of the properties of memes in a memetic sense, in addition by virtue of being propagated through the internet they also leave digital footprints behind them which are traceable and analysable (Coscia, 2013).

The Internet, also referred to as network of networks, provides an ideal playground for memes. Using the hyper-connectivity and colossal magnitude of the internet, memes acquire an infinite potential to replicate and propagate themselves. Understanding the spread and modification behaviour of internet memes can be used to develop insights into the patterns of subversion in Islam and Muslims.

### 3.1.1. Sampling Method

Criterion sampling which is a subcategory of purposive sampling has been used for this research. This method was selected because it helps identify cases that are information rich and provide qualitative components to quantitative data (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). This sampling strategy also ensures selection of outliers and unique events. From the method point of view, outliers are important to analysis. Criterion-i strategy, which identifies and selects cases that meet some predetermined criterion, was adopted for selection of hashtags (Palinkas et. al, 2015). For carrying out the network analysis, hashtags widely used on Twitter were selected and divided into two pools based on following criteria:

- A. Hashtags related to popular and dominant beliefs or practices in Islam and Muslims (Table 1)
- B. Modification of hashtags in pool A representing counter beliefs, arguments and practices

*Table 1: Pool A hashtags*

#halal	#haram	#isis	#hijab
#ramadan	#Jihad	#Talibans	#Sharia
#sunnah	#Hadith	#terrorism	#islam

Pool B consists of popular hashtags subverting the hashtags in pool A. The popularity of the hashtags was determined by conducting a manual research by identifying widely shared memes on Islam and Muslim. Besides this the background information on the meme aggregators like KYM (<https://knowyourmeme.com>) and Me.Me <https://me.me> was instrumental in selection of hashtags. (Table 2).

*Table 2: Pool B hashtags*

#halalhumour	#halalbanter	#OpISIS	#MuslimRage
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#Muslimmemes	#halaljokes	#YouAintNoMuslimBruv	#OrdinaryMuslimMan
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#Muslimmeme	#memritv	#isiscrappycollagegrandprix	#OpParis
#Muslimsfunny	#isischan	#innocenceofMuslims	#Muslimjokes
#halalmemes	#halalcomedy	#dudeyouhavenoquran	#IslamicRageBoy
#harammemes	#ramadanmemes	#iwilldestroyisis	#whiteISIS
#abuhajaar	#jihadibride	#TraditionallySubmissive	#JihadBarbie

The hashtags from pool B on Islam and Muslims; can be further divided into two categories – subversion and reinforcement- depending upon the perceived predominant function of the meme. However, these two categories are not mutually exclusive as these are two extreme functions attributed to the hashtag memes. Many memes show complex framing and functionality whereby suggesting subtle subversion of some canonical ideas while continuing the reinforcement of the other. For example, the hashtags associated with terrorist organization ISIS are predominantly used to subvert ISIS’s nefarious agenda using hashtags as a memetic tool while hashtags like #innocenceofMuslims have been largely used to reinforce stereotypes about Islam and Prophet Mohammad. However, both these hashtags might have also been used by people it intends to target in order to get their message across. Similarly, hashtags like #halallhumour, #muslimmemes do not exclusively fall under any one category and act both as subversive as well as reinforcement memetic tools. Following is the brief introduction to some of the key hashtags with illustrative examples:

- **#OpISIS** is an ongoing online hacktivist movement against ISIS which was launched by a group of anonymous hacktivists in the wake of the murder of journalists of French magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2015 (Figure 15). The hacktivist operation includes exposing ISIS’s sensitive information like IP address, defacing their accounts and surveilling their dark online activities by getting access to their accounts (Zorabedian, 2016).
- **#OpParis** which stands for Operation Paris is an online hacktivist campaign (Figure 14) led by anonymous netizens against ISIS in 2015. Its agenda is like that of #OpISIS to disrupt the online propaganda of ISIS by hacking into their accounts. #OpParis have claimed to have taken down thousands of ISIS accounts. The regular netizens have used these hashtags to not

only show their support to these online operations but also to share memes in order to mock ISIS.



Figure 14: Example of use of #OpISIS and #OpParis (Twitter)

- **#isiscrappycollagegrandprix** was started by Japanese netizens to ridicule ISIS after they had released a video featuring two Japanese men – Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto, held hostage somewhere in Syria demanding ransom in exchange of their release in 2015 ((Figure 15). Instead of being scared, the Japanese people reacted by mocking ISIS using this hashtag. Within hours the hashtag went viral and people beyond Japan used it to share memes to deride ISIS. In a way this hashtag became a tool to subvert the intended message of the released video which was to create terror and demand ransom; instead, it upended its function by using the snapshots from the video to ridicule ISIS.



Figure 15: Example of use of #ISISCrappyCollageGrandPrix (Twitter)

- **#innocenceofMuslims:** This hashtag (Figure 16) is associated with a crude anti-Islamic short-video film *The Innocence of Muslims* released in July 2012 by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula; directed by an American filmmaker Alen Roberts. The film not only depicted Mohammad – the Prophet of Islam, which is considered forbidden in Islam by many Muslims – but also portrayed him as a philanderer, child molester and gay (Marantz, 2012). The film led to protests across the globe. Susan Rice, the then National Security Adviser to President Barack Obama had suggested the link between the protest and the attack on the American embassy in Benghazi. The hashtag was used to air thoughts opposing this film as well as opposing the demands to take it down from YouTube as a clear violation of the right to speech guaranteed in the First amendment of the constitution of the United States.

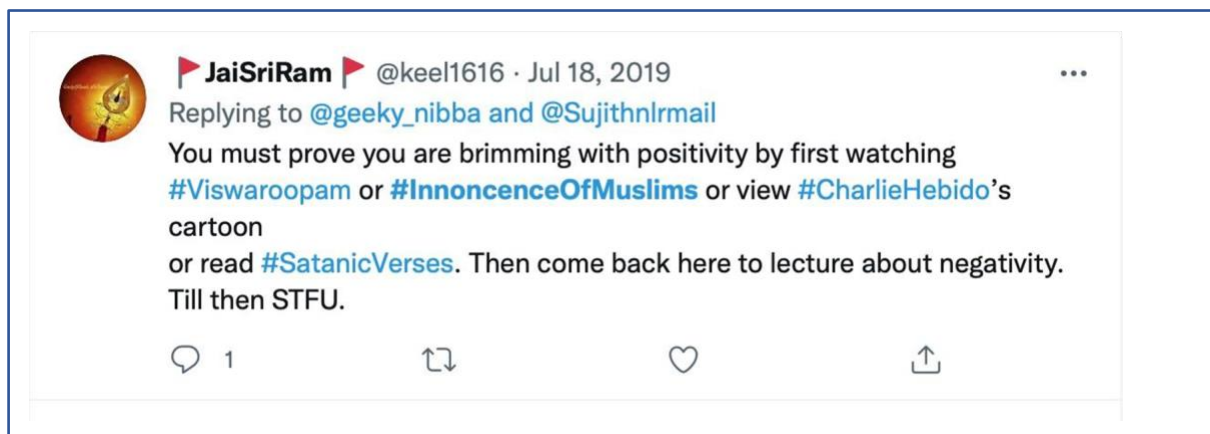


Figure 16: Example of use of hashtag #innocenceofMuslims

- **#MuslimRage:** Reacting to the controversy and protests in the wake of the film *The Innocence of Muslim Man*, Newsweek magazine published a cover story “Muslim Rage and The Last Gasp of Islamic Hate”. It also launched a hashtag #Muslimrage (Figure 17) along with the article inviting people to express themselves on the issue. While people expressed support and agreement with the story using this hashtag, many on Twitter started mocking the hashtag and the way in which the essay was framed. Therefore, in the process they subverted the original intention with which the hashtag was shared (Sills, 2017).
- **#ISISChan:** ISIS-Chan is a Moe girl anime Manga (a Japanese comic book genre) character created by the Japanese netizens to mock ISIS along with #Isiscrappygrandprix (Figure 17) in 2015 after the ISIS hostage situation leading to the murder of two Japanese hostage by the ISIS. ISIS-Chan’s character is used to ‘Google-bomb’ the online space enjoyed by ISIS and jamming it with the images that taunt them. Since the conception of this character, Twitterati



have been using it with *#ISISchan* to share various illustrations of ISIS-Chan in various ISIS settings.



Figure 17: Example of use of hashtag #MuslimRage and #ISISChan

- **#iwilldestroyISIS:** This hashtag went viral after the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015. Linda Glocke posted "I will destroy ISIS" on Facebook in reaction to two Japanese men held hostage by ISIS in Syria. However, it only caught memers' attention after the Paris attack. #iwilldestroyisis was used by netizens to express their outrage towards ISIS by challenging them using Linda's bold expression. Besides the hilarious photoshopped images of Linda using sophisticated military tanks and guns against ISIS, the hashtag was used to express a common person's defiance in the face of brutal barbarism by ISIS.
- **#abuhajaar:** Abu Hajaar was a name of an ISIS fighter, who was seen in a video clip fighting alongside his three other group members against the Kurds in 2016. The video was shot by one of the group members wearing a head camera and was broadcasted by VICE News. The American channel claimed that it obtained the footage after the ISIS recruit died fighting the Kurds in northern Iraq. The video which the ISIS fighters intended to shoot for its propaganda went viral because for the first-time people could see unedited ISIS video which instead of wrecking fear and horror turned out to be hilarious on account of untrained and incompetent fighting. Not just the video went viral, but people started creating and sharing internet memes from a screengrab of the video as well as other unrelated images; ridiculing ISIS with hashtag #abuhajaar the man who is seen to be clearly unskilled for the job.
- **#Memritv:** Washington-based Memri TV by the Middle East Media Research Institute, was launched in 2004. Its stated primary motive is to translate Arabic and Persian content, to English language. The channel has gained notoriety for selecting the worst programmes which



reinforces negative stereotypes about Muslims. The channel is often called-out for inaccurate and absurd translations. The hashtag *#Memritv* is frequently used to mock the channel by creating memes having screen grabs from the TV's broadcast and then tweaking them for parody.

- **#OrdinaryMuslimMan:** This hashtag is used along with a very famous meme called the 'The Ordinary Muslim Man' which has manifested itself as a meme family challenging the stereotypes about Muslims in the wake of 9/11 attacks. It typically features a smiling man who can be easily identified as a Muslim from his attire which includes a Muslim taqiyya hat along with a bait-and-switch caption. The bait plays along a stereotype and the switch provides a surprising antithesis to the stereotype.
- **#YouAintNoMuslimBruv:** In December 2015, a man tried to stab a bystander while shouting 'Allah hu Akbar' in the London Underground. Another man who was present at the site reacted to this and said to the knifeman "You Aint No Muslim Bruv" to delegitimise his claim to be a Muslim and doing this in the name of Allah. This video soon went viral and people appropriated and use the hashtag *#youaintnoMuslimbruv* to express their disapproval and disgust with the use of Islamic imagery and phrases to justify the criminal acts committed by the terrorists.
- **#IslamicRageBoy:** The Islamic Rage became a hashtag when a Kashmiri man Shakeel Ahmand Bhat, was photographed protesting the infamous Prophet Mohammad Danish Jyllands-Posten Cartoon; by the news agencies in September 2015 and it consequently featured in newspapers and blog websites. The satirical conservative news blog Nose On Your Face picked it up and named him The Islamic Rage Boy depicting in general the rage of the Islamic society towards the ones who do not agree with them. According to bloggers of Nose On Your Face some are 'perennially angry' (Butt, 2017) and they imagined Shakeel Bhat's reaction represented them. The meme went viral, and the original photo gets photoshopped with creative captions by the critics of Islam and Muslims.
- **#dudeyouhavenoquran:** In 2010 Jacob Isom, a man from Texas, USA prevented a group of Christians from publicly burning the Quran in a city park to protest and observe the September 9/11 attacks on the WTO Towers in New York City. Isom snatched the Quran from the evangelist pastor's hand and said "Dude, you have no Quran ". The video showing the entire

incident and the phrase soon went viral. It was memed and supported by netizens to reject bigotry and hate towards Islam and Muslims.

- **#halalhumour:** *Halal* is an Arabic word which means ‘permissible’. This word is used in everyday Muslim settings for anything like food, practices, ideas – that human beings indulge in. Therefore, the hashtag #halalhumour is using the term as a pun to mean humour that is permissible in Islam. This is especially important to understand in the context of the small section of maulvis who sometimes are critical of some of the practices which they label un-Islamic. #halalhumour is a popular hashtag using which Muslims share funny ideas, images, memes and jokes about their inner and outer worlds.
- **#harammemes:** *Haram* is an Arabic word which means the opposite of *Halal*, meaning ‘not permissible’. This hashtag is mainly used by Muslims to share internal jokes using Islamic concepts.
- **#ramadanmemes:** Ramadan – the holy month of Islam, when Muslims observe fasting for a month culminating into Eid, is one of the biggest occasions to share greetings, expressions, humour on this joyous occasions. Ardours fasting and praying rituals in this month, afford many opportunities for Muslim netizens to express themselves in humorous ways.
- **#JihadBarbie:** The genesis of this meme hashtags is connected to Reem Riyasha, a female suicide bomber. It became a meme when Holly Fisher, a conservative lady from West Virginia, posted a picture of herself, holding a gun and a Bible. The posted photograph of Holly Fisher was similar to Reem Riyasha, also holding a book and a gun. It was first posted in 2014 and gained more than 2000 retweets and favourites.
- **#JihadiBride:** The origin of #JihadiBride is unknown. However, this hashtag is widely used on social media to describe and mock women who left their homes in the western countries mainly Canada, Europe and the United Kingdom to join ISIS and often marry its western recruits. This hashtag particularly got circulated extensively when the case of three women including Shamima Begum leaving London for Syria and her subsequent plight in the Syrian refugee camp after the collapse for Islamic state, came to the light. Since then, this hashtag has been used in a variety of ways including critiquing the hashtags usage and in support of these women or an appeal to understand the circumstances in which they were radicalised. This hashtag was found to be used with other hashtags like #isisbride and #bethnalgreenacademy.

- **#WhiteISIS:** #WhiteIsis hashtag has been mainly used to counter extremism in the western society mainly by their own citizens in order to criticise anti-women, anti-immigrants, so called anti-terrorism, racist politics and policies of the right wing, especially the Republicans in USA and Tories in the UK. For example, in the recent past this hashtag was used in order to criticise the organisations like the Proud Boys and Republicans for passing an anti-abortion law in Texas, etc. #whiteisis is commonly used with similar hashtags like #whitetaliban, #vanillaisis, #yallalqaeda, etc.
- **#TraditionallySubmissive:** In 2016 the then British Prime Minister David Cameron while announcing a new policy of boosting English learning amongst Muslim women for their better integration with the English society, made a connection between poor English-speaking skills of Muslim women and potential radicalisation from extremist Islamic ideologies as he said they are “traditionally submissive”. This led to a huge digital protest by Muslim women in the UK who shared details on their education, achievements, and contribution to the UK in order to bring home a point about prejudice against them. Interestingly, most of the results that show up while searching for this hashtag on Twitter are from the Muslim women with hijab. They are the ones who seem to have been asserting their choices and space in the entire debate. This hashtag was mainly found to be used as a standalone hashtag and was mostly not used with other hashtags.

### 3.1.2. Data source

Data to be used for the study should be representative of the internet space, hence most popular and widely used sources have been selected for this research. The meme data has been obtained from the following sources:

Twitter (<https://twitter.com/>): Twitter, since its inception in 2006, has evolved as a platform dedicated to voice personal expressions using the concept of microblogging. Using the idea of “following” users without mandatory reciprocity, and easy to use interface makes it ideal to study community behaviour and pattern of information diffusion. The data generated by Twitter platform has attributes like hashtags, mentions, retweets, and location, which makes it convenient for network analysis. It is one of the most popular microblogging platforms allowing users to broadcast 280-character text messages and images, to their follower network. Twitter offers an immense opportunity to study the internet memes. It is one of the main platforms for generating and sharing internet memes. It also has an inherently built-in network structure, message content in text form, meme spread event statistics and location attributes. The platform has been studied thoroughly for the purpose of research and data collection. The 280-character text messages posted on the platform are called **tweets**. The username of the Twitter account holder is called **Handle**. Reposting the same message with or without comments by other users is called **retweeting**. Between a pair of Twitter users, following types of interactions have been identified (Table 3):

*Table 3: Description of Twitter terms*

<b>Twitter interaction</b>	<b>Description of interaction</b>
Follow	When a user subscribes to another user's tweet.
Followers	List of all the users following a particular account.
Followed	List of all users followed by a particular account also referred to as friends.
Timeline	Stream of tweets from accounts followed by the user.
Reply	Posting a comment publicly to another user by placing @ prefix to target user's handle

Direct message	Private communication between two users followed by one another
Retweet	Reposting another user's tweet without changing the original text represented by RT.
Modified Tweet	Reposting another user's tweet by changing the original text represented by MT
Hat-Tip	Tweet acknowledging another user as source of a link represented by HT
Non-reply Mention	Including another user handle in a retweet.

A Twitter user can also attach indexable topic identifiers to their tweets by using “#” symbol. These attachments are called hashtags in twitter vernacular and used to create topics. Each hashtag has been considered as a meme (Weng, 2014). Hashtags are concretely identifiable and traceable. The properties of hashtags are in consonance with the conceptualization of memes by Dawkins. Majority of the hashtags are unique catchphrases and mostly spread by imitation. Furthermore, they mutate, compete, and survive in the Twitter network. Hashtags allow users to quickly find messages with specific themes or content. For instance, in September 2017, #TakeAKnee generated 1.2 million tweets in a span of three days. The hashtag was used to describe the protest racial injustice. The movement was started by NFL player Colin Kaepernick who protested by kneeling down during the American national anthem played prior to the start of football matches (BBC, 2017). Similar Web, a website ranking company found that, as of 2018 more than 85% of traffic on the top 50 websites use hashtags.

By using the Twitter Streaming API and the ‘GET followers’ method of the Twitter REST API, tweets were collected using a combination of hashtags and topic related search strings listed below (Table 4):

*Table 4: List of topic search strings used for data collection*

Islam	Muslim	ISIS	Daesh
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Quran	Jihad	Ramadan	Terrorism
Imam	Burqa	Hijab	Mohammad

Jannah	Mosque	Masjid	Fajr
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The Twitter data also provided the geotagged tweets on the topics listed above which were collected to study the geographical distribution of memes. The data obtained was examined and classified in two categories: tweets containing text and tweets containing text with image. The images obtained were downloaded and cross referenced with the metadata collected from KnowYourMeme (KYM).

KnowYourMeme (<https://knowyourmeme.com/>): KnowYourMeme (KYM) is the most popular website which documents, annotates the internet memes and other web events like viral videos, catchphrases, image macros, etc. This platform was used to obtain meme metadata and identification of meme families. Few meme families identified for this research are:

*Table 5: List of Meme families identified for the research*

Operation ISIS	Dude, you have no Quran	You Ain't No Muslim, Bruv
Ordinary Muslim Man	Islamic Rage Boy	ISIS / Daesh
Innocence of Muslim	MEMRI TV	Condescending Wonka
Woman Yelling at a Cat	"Y U NO" Guy	Smudge the Cat
Futurama Fry	Forever Alone	Scumbag Steve
Peter Parker Crying	Surprised Koala	Donald Trump's Muslim Ban
Being Bad Luck Brian	The Confession Bear	Potato Jesus
Godzilla Attack on Titan	FBI Agent Watching me	Philosraptor
Overly Attached Girlfriend	Annoyed Picard	Pepe the Frog

Kim Jong-un watching The Interview	Distracted Boyfriend	
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Several important metadata of interest were extracted from KYM. KYM documents the description of the meme, origin, number of views on KYM, number of images and videos related to meme and associated tags (Figure 18).

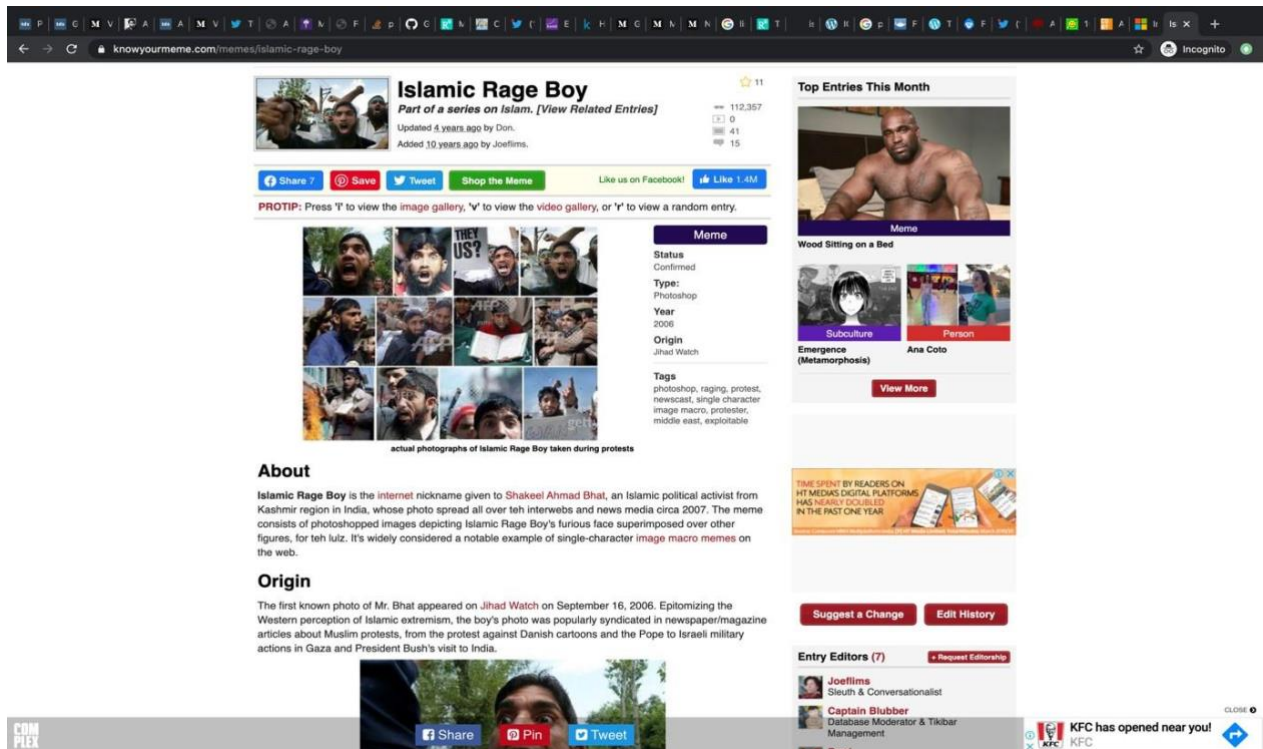


Figure 18: Metadata about the meme (Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com>)

Meme Generator (<https://memegenerator.net/>): It is one of the most popular and easy to use meme creation platforms on the internet. The website hosts a pool of predefined image macros from popular meme categories. Users can add custom text and generate their own version of memes. Metadata and statistics from this meme production platform is used to study mutation and variation in memes.

All the above listed platforms can be categorised as meme production annotation and propagation sources. Meme production platforms were used to trace the origin of memes.

The standard data processing pipeline for this research has included tracing the origin of memes of interest, grouping them into meme families using evidence from meme annotation sites and see their propagation, variation, and success, on meme sharing platforms using network analysis.

### 3.1.3. Data collection strategy

The researcher adopted a multipronged strategy for collecting data from Twitter platform. The Twitter data has been pulled from the platform using an Application Programming Interface (API) designed to interact with the platform. This API is used to pull data from Twitter based upon the searched keywords and associated parameters like time and location. After following a user account authentication protocol, Twitter provided a user secret key and validation token for requesting data from API. The free to use API has certain limitations. It doesn't allow users to request tweets which are older than 7 days from the date of query. Also, the number of results returned are limited. To address these limitations of free API, several prebuilt tools were used to search and extract the data based on keywords:

- The first strategy implemented was to use the Twitter Streaming Importer functionality in Gephi software. Gephi is a network analysis environment. The researcher used the API secret key to authenticate the Gephi and pull tweets based on the hashtags keywords.
- Most of the hashtags selected for the research originated from some event which happened several years before the start of this research. To capture tweets which were posted during the time of the event, the researcher has used the web data scraping libraries available in Python programming language to query the API. The library used for this work is "sunscape". Another method employed to pull the historical tweets was to use COSMOS 2.0 software tool developed by Social Data Science Lab at Cardiff University.

Apart from the above two approaches, manual lookup on Twitter website with advanced search field option was also used to collect data on hashtags.

Although the data collected for this research starts from 2012, its content deeply connects to contemporary history of the Islamic world. However, owing to a variety of limitations a time needed to be chosen keeping in mind the object and subject of the study. If one were to look at the important events of global magnitude involving Muslims societies in the immediate past then roughly the following timeline might be useful (obviously, a lot more was happening in many other parts concerning Muslims societies, this list only highlights a few of them.)



- **1979-2000:** Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, formation of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982, Rise of Mujahideen against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and their subsequently withdrawal in 1989, Taliban assuming power in Afghanistan in 1996, beginning of the first Intifada by Palestinians against the atrocities of the Israeli state, Gulf War (1990-1991). This phase was mainly dominated by territorial conflicts mostly restricted to fixed geographical boundaries. However, the next phase saw the non-state actors operating globally and projecting themselves based on Islamic theology.
- **2001-2011:** 9/11 attacks on the United States of America, Al-Qaeda going global and subsequent 'war on terror', Iraq War starting in 2003, beginning of people's uprising in various countries of the Arabian peninsula and North Africa starting with Tunisia in 2010. Both – the attack on the World Trade Centre as well as the infectious Arab Spring made this phase unprecedented in more than one way as it saw powerful state heads like Saddam Hussein, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya being deposed not just through wars but also elections. Beginning of the decade-long war in Syria.
- **2012-2021:** A series of important events marked the beginning of the next phase in many parts of the world involving Muslims. Muslim brotherhood won the 2012 Presidential election in Egypt providing fodder to people who use Muslims and Islam to further their own local politics in their respective societies, Nigeria officially declared war against Boko Haram, self-proclaimed Islamic State founded in 2013 rose to global prominence in 2014 and has been ruthlessly active since then in not just the Levant but also the other parts of the world, publication of Islam's Prophet's cartoons by the French satirical magazine – Charlie Hebdo in 2015 leading to several terrorist attacks and protests across the world. This phase was most important from this research's point of view because after two years of protests (sometimes called "Twitter Revolution" "Facebook Revolution") and change of regimes there was some semblance of stability in some countries of the middle east. If this researcher had chosen to collect the data from 2010 then there was a possibility that the representative data would have been skewed towards a specific event – the Arab Spring. Moreover, starting the data collection from 2013 would have meant possible domination of ISIS data. Therefore, the data collection was started in 2012 and it was collected until August 2021 in order to provide the most up-to-date evidence to the objectives of the research. To the researcher's mind, rise of organisations like the ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabab on one side provided powerful evidence, to forward anti-Muslim narrative, in the hands of people who argue the 'threat' from 'them' at the same time this also presented a situation where Muslims (locally and internationally) engaged in self-

representation, self-narration, and negation in the face of these events and ideologies claiming to be Islamic. This pool of data held a promising possibility of studying subversion in dominant ideas.

Data for #IslamicRageBoy and #dudeyouhavenoquran have been collected from 2009 as events related to these hashtags happened in 2009 and 2010.

Table 6 and Table 7 list down the number of tweets analysed for each meme hashtags:

*Table 6: Pool B Hashtags*

<b>Hashtags</b>	<b>Counts</b>	<b>Date range of tweets</b>
#halalhumour	2122	2012 – 2021
#halalbanter	268	2012 – 2021
#OpISIS	10000	2017 – 2021
#OpParis	10000	2015 – 2021
#MuslimRage	10000	2012 – 2021
#Muslimmemes	2488	2012 – 2021
#YouAintNoMuslimBruv	10000	2015 – 2021
#OrdinaryMuslimMan	43	2012 – 2015
#isiscrappycollagegrandprix	53	2015
#halaljokes	985	2012 – 2021
#innocenceofMuslims	5983	2012 – 2021
#iwilldestroyISIS	49	2015 – 2019
#memritv	10000	2020 – 2021
#ISISChan	10000	2015 – 2021
#ramadanmemes	529	2021 – 2021
# JihadBarbie	92	2014 – 2021
#harammemes	77	2016 – 2021
#abuhajaar	174	2013 – 2021
#TraditionallySubmissive	4583	2016 – 2020
#WhiteISIS	7832	2014 – 2021
#dudeyouhavenoquran	35	2010 – 2016

#IslamicRageBoy	59	2009 – 2020
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#jihadibride	887	2014 – 2021
#halalcomedy	281	2016 – 2021
#halalmemes	1129	2013 – 2021
#muslimjokes	675	2012 – 2021
#muslimfunny	179	2012 – 2021
<b>Total</b>	<b>88523</b>	

*Table 7: Pool A Hashtags*

<b>Hashtags</b>	<b>Counts</b>	<b>Date range of tweets</b>
#halal	10000	2012 – 2021
#haram	10000	2012 – 2021
#ISIS	10000	2012 – 2021
#hijab	10000	2012 – 2021
#ramadan	10000	2012 – 2021
#Jihad	10000	2012 – 2021
#Talibans	10000	2012 – 2021
#Sharia	10000	2012 – 2021
#sunnah	10000	2012 – 2021
#Hadith	10000	2012 – 2021
#terrorism	10000	2012 – 2021
#Islam	10000	2012 – 2021
<b>Total</b>	<b>120000</b>	

#### 3.1.4. Software and tools used

Network analysis software tools found suitable for the research are used to identify, represent, analyse, visualise, and simulate nodes and edges from various types of relational and non-relational input data. The tools have inbuilt mathematical models, statistical routines and logical relations of graph theory. These tools also have capability to generate the visual representations of networks by ingesting data from social network sites like Twitter. Visualisations are important to understand the data and frequently used as an additional or standalone network analysis method.

A few tools that were used to generate networks:

- **Gephi** (<https://gephi.org/>): It is an interactive visualization and data exploration platform for all kinds of networks. It is one of the most popular open-source tools to explore and understand graphs. The user can interact with the network representation, manipulate the structures, shapes and colors of edges and nodes to reveal hidden properties. It has an inbuilt 3D render engine to display large networks in real-time. The software has generic and multi-task architecture which offers various possibilities to work with massive datasets and extract valuable insights.
- **NodeXL** (<https://www.smrfoundation.org/>): NodeXL is a free and open source add-in for Microsoft Excel. NodeXL is a project from the Social Media Research Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to developing open tools, creating open data, and research related to social media (Pew Research Centre, 2019). NodeXL is a generic network analysis application supporting network overview generation, discovery, and exploration. This tool enables the automation of the whole data processing pipeline starting with network data collection using API endpoints, pre-processing and statistical analysis, processed network visualisations and report generation. NodeXL is a GUI based tool and allows non-programmers to quickly generate useful network statistics, metrics and visualisations in the familiar Excel environment. It incorporates simple filtering, data manipulation and display attributes which can be used to highlight important structures in networks. NodeXL supports data extraction from a range of data sources like personal email indexes, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, Facebook, Wikis and WWW hyperlinks, etc. It also facilitates manual data imports in text, CSV, or GraphML files.
- **ATLAS Ti** (<https://atlasti.com/>): The ATLAS.ti is a proprietary data analysis tool designed to uncover and systematically analyse unstructured data like text and multimedia content. The tool allows users to locate, code and annotate data, evaluate their importance, and to extract complex relations. It has the capability to encode text, image and locational data. It can directly import tweets. The comments and images obtained from Twitter, were processed using ATLAS Ti, for it to be used to generate networks using Gephi and NodeXL. The comments and images can be coded in the ATLAS Ti environment to generate link files. ATLAS Ti also supports development of relational coding which can be transcribed as edges in the network. These links and relational coding files can be imported into a network analysis tool to build network graphs and do further analysis.

## 3.2. Network analysis

This research is about understanding the behaviour of internet memes using attributional and relational data. There are many aspects to be considered, like the nature of an individual meme, mode of interaction between them and the resultant effects when they interact. The overall outcome and predictability of any system of internet memes will depend upon our understanding of all aforementioned dynamics. Critical to the understanding of the behaviour of memes is finding the numerous ways in which they are connected. These patterns of connections can be represented as a network with ideas being the network vertices or nodes and the connections to the edges.

We can understand networks as a system of vertices connected through edges (Scott, 1988). Simply put, a network is any whole, composed of parts, discriminable from a background, and composed of other parts and wholes, stacked into each other at multiple levels of scale. Anything that can be represented in this fashion can be seen as a network. A tree in a forest can be seen as a network of leaves, branches and roots. This network is distinguishable from a background, which includes the soil in which it grows, the air around it, and the rest of the forest, and all of these components are composed of more networks in turn. There are cells in the leaves and branches, and they are constituent of a network at the same time they also carry networks within them. As an object standing in the forest and observing the tree, one is also a network, composed of more networks. The fact that one perceives the tree as a network is also itself a result of the way in which different networks inside me interact together in the mode of intertwining generally called perception. Whether considered from “inside” or “outside” of a given observer, it is all networks, all the way down, simply of different kinds. This particular structure has a significant effect on the behaviour of the system. Deciphering the network structure can reveal numerous insights. Representing memes in terms of networks will reveal the hidden contents and aspects of the meme itself, hence, the researcher’s choice of the method.

### 3.2.1. Networks: Key concepts

As described above, it is easy to find networks all around us and within us. There are various ways to visualise networks. They may be seen as two points connected by a line or a huge cluster of points connected with one another by numerous lines (edges) to form a dense mesh. Depending upon the context and scenario, different roles can be assigned to these points and links. Just by looking at such visual representations, one can see that there are regions in the network which have dense interconnections. Sometimes, there are points in the network which become central because they have a maximum number of links (Borgatti et. al, 2009). Recognizing these structural

features is important to network analysis. These features serve as a starting point in understanding the nature of the system under investigation.

There are different levels of connectedness in networks. The links formed at the level of structure exhibit density, closeness, and centrality in the network (Strogatz, 2001). The other level at which the links are formed is the activity of the nodes. This level of linkage results from the fact that each node's action affects the action of all other nodes in the network (Easley and Kleinberg, 2010). This means that in addition to analysing network structure, the behaviour of each node reveals useful insights and supplements the understanding of the system. If the interacting nodes in the network have strong incentives to achieve certain goals, then nodes have to take into account the action of other nodes before they plan their own action. Hence, network models should also take into consideration the strategic behaviour exhibited by nodes.

However, there are some characteristics that any network is found to be showcasing universally, independent of its complexity, density, and nature. The 'small world effect' and 'scale-free' are two such properties. It is both surprising and insightful to know that most networks, including real networks (internet, communication network, biological network, etc.) have been found to exhibit these properties.

### **A. Scale-free property**

According to scale-free property, any network automatically forms hubs. Hubs are nodes which have a high number of links with other nodes, in comparison to the other nodes in the network. All networks reveal hubs or nodes with high centrality or edges (Borgatti et. al, 2009). It is around these hubs that most activity in the network concentrates. One can visualise these hubs as leaders. In a way these hubs are signs of organisational principles (Barabasi, 2016) and point towards the classical question of power distribution in society. These hubs follow a pattern which is not random, as in a random network each node pair is connected with equal probability (Barabasi, 2014).

## **B. Small world effect or Principle of six-degree separation**

According to the small world effect, most nodes in a network can be reached from every other node by a small number of hops (Barabasi, 2016). This observation relates to the principle of six-degree separation which is also known as the small world effect. It is yet another ubiquitous property of a network according to which the separation between any two nodes is never more than six degrees or six nodes. It means that for a node to get in touch with any other node in the network it would only take six other nodes. In these cases, it is found that hubs act as in-between bridges connecting two widely separated nodes.

Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy conceived this for the first time in his 1929 short-story *Chains* and this was later validated by Harvard psychologist Stanley Milgram's famous experiment where he asked his subjects – to send a postcard to a addressee who the sender was very unlikely to know. Miligram asked them to post it to someone they think can know the person and the person who receives it will then send it to someone he thinks can know that person until it reaches its destination. Although a very low number of postcards reached the destination, he found that on an average it took six people for the card to finally reach its destination. This property has been found true in real as well as other computer networks. That is why it is also known as the ‘small world effect’ suggesting that it is a small world after all.

These network effects have been found very much effective in hidden pattern discovery. This research uses network representation to study and draw patterns hidden inside and between the internet memes.

## **C. Modelling /Analysing a network**

Analysis of networks is deeply rooted in a mathematical model called graph theory. Graph theory involves the study of nature and attributes of graphs. Graphs are mathematical constructs used to represent pairwise relations between objects or vertices or nodes (Scott, 1988). The connection between two vertices or nodes is represented by an edge (Figure 2). The structure of the network is also referred to as topology. Networks have similar structure as graphs with real world attributes attached to vertices and edges. Properties of graphs are used in developing network analysis methods. The network model has proved itself to be an important tool to study complex systems having many nodes and edges.

### 3.2.2. Network Graphs: Key concepts and definitions

#### A. Nodes and Edges

The graph representation allows to elucidate the structure and behaviour of networks. They are useful to portray physical and logical linkages. Graph specifies connections among a collection of objects. Objects and connections are termed as nodes and edges, respectively. Two nodes are *neighbours* if they are connected by an edge. Graphs may be directed or undirected. If a node points to another node (usually represented with an arrow) the graph is directed, otherwise it is undirected.

The attributes assigned to nodes in a graph travel through the edges. A sequence of nodes with each consecutive pair connected by an edge in the sequence forms a *path* in the graph. There could be many possible configurations of path in graph models. They may be linear, branched, or cyclic (Borgatti et. al, 2009). These configurational variations exhibit interesting topology and are progenitors of emergent properties of the system.

#### B. Metrics in network graph

Graph theory provides a set of simple yet powerful metrics for understanding the nature of a network. These include aggregate network metrics such as density and number of connected components, which can be used to characterise the topology of a network as a whole. They also include node metrics including degree, betweenness centrality, eigenvector centrality, closeness centrality, and clustering coefficient that can be used to identify unique or important nodes within a network (Easley and Kleinberg, 2010). These metrics can be used to visualise network models and make sense of a large volume of data. The metrics that have been used in this research are summarised below (Table 8):

*Table 8: List of network analysis metrics*

<b>Centrality</b>	Nodes in a network are connected to other nodes. Centrality is the measure of the number connection a particular node has with other nodes. More the connections or links, the centrality will be higher. In a network, the nodes which are heavily connected to the other nodes are called hubs and have high centrality. Therefore, measuring centrality nodes enables us to identify the most and least connected nodes in the network suggesting the power relation in the network. This is also known as Degree Centrality.
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<b>Betweenness</b>	It is a centrality measure, quantifying the number of times a node acts as a bridge along the shortest path between the two other nodes. If a Betweenness Centrality of a particular node is high that means it is part of the shortest route between two nodes in that network. The nodes which find themselves as part of many shortest paths automatically become crucial in flow of data and robustness of that network. Betweenness plays a key role in the principle of six-degree separation.
<b>Closeness</b>	It is also a centrality measure. The closeness centrality of a node is the average length of shortest path between the node and all other nodes in the network. It measures how close a particular node is to all other nodes of the network. A node's physical position in relation to the other nodes is not important here; what matters is how well it is connected or not, to the hubs in the network. Therefore, nodes at the periphery of the network can have high Closeness measure in comparison to the nodes at the centre.
<b>Degree</b>	Degree centrality measures the number of edges incident upon a node.
<b>Bridge</b>	A network's strength is in its connection. Each node is not equal in its ability to forge connections. An edge is identified as a bridge if deleting that edge would cause its pair of connected nodes to lie in different parts of the network. While the nodes that emerge as hubs have higher chances to act as Bridges to connect disparate sub-networks, there are nodes which do not have high Centrality measure but still act as Bridges because of the quality of their connections. Therefore, Bridges ensure linkages between the otherwise disjointed components of a network
<b>Clustering Coefficient</b>	Measure of the degree to which nodes in a network tend to cluster together. This measure of local clustering of a network is measured by finding out how closely a given node's neighbours are connected. The density of the connection is directly proportional to the Clustering Coefficient measure. Therefore, higher the density of connections between the neighbours of a given node, higher will be its Clustering Coefficient and vice versa.
<b>Eigenvector Centrality</b>	It measures the importance of a node in the network by assigning the relative scores to all other nodes. It is based on the supposition that connections to nodes with high scores (high centrality) contribute more to the score of the node than similar equivalent connections to nodes with low scores (low centrality). Eigenvector Centrality is of special importance in studying Social Networks. Eigenvector Centrality highlights the importance of qualitative connections over quantitative meaning a node will have a higher Eigenvector Centrality measure by connecting with few nodes with a high Degree Centrality score than connecting with a lot of nodes having low Degree Centrality.
<b>Path length</b>	Distance between a pair of nodes in the network.

<b>Prestige</b>	It is used to describe a node's centrality in a directed graph. A directed network is where the path has a defined direction. For example, phone calls made by individuals will make a directed network.
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### C. Network data representation

The choice of network data representation depends upon convenience and the application at hand. As already discussed, networks can be represented using graph theoretical approach. This research uses an empirical construct from graph theory called adjacency matrix to represent network data (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). A matrix is a rectangular array of objects arranged in rows and columns. The objects inside the matrix are called elements of the matrix. The elements are represented by the row and column numbers. Hence, by convention, (1,1) is the element located at the intersection of the first row and first column. The elements of the adjacency matrix indicate whether a pair of nodes are adjacent or not in a network. An element of the adjacency matrix is one if there is an edge between the nodes or zero otherwise.

#### 3.2.3. Classical Network

Internet memes with its inherent tendency to replicate, propagate, mutate, and compete using dense interconnections of world wide web, form an ideal candidate for network analysis. Considering the structure and behaviour of internet memes, there is a possibility to deconstruct memes into its constituent network layers. Following key networks have been generated from the data collected:

- Meme network: The master network of memes (Actor, Semantic and Bimodal Network).
- Geographical distribution: A distribution of geotagged tweets representing the geographical distribution of the meme.

The data collected from Twitter offered the possibility to create actor, bimodal and semantic networks. In an actor network, the node represents users, and edges represent interactions between users. An 'interaction' can be defined as a 'retweet', 'reply', 'like' or 'mentions'. The actor network facilitates a discussion on who is interacting to whom in the context of a particular hashtag or search string. Actor networks were generated for each identified hashtag and search string to see the nature and intensity of activity for a particular meme.

Further, a semantic network has been designed to understand the information content of memes. This is a hybrid network emerging from structure and content networks. In this network nodes represent unique concepts or motifs (like words, popular catch phrases or image macro, etc.) and edges represent the co-occurrence of concepts for all observations in the data set. For instance, in the Twitter semantic network, nodes represent either hashtags like “#OpISIS” or single terms like “ISIS”. In the dataset of 20,000 observations, if #opisis and the term ISIS appear together in 2000 tweets, then #opisis and ISIS, together will have a weight of 2000. By studying the relative weights between pairs of unique concepts, correlation strength of different ideas and concepts can be deciphered.

Another set of informative networks created are bimodal networks. Bimodal network connects two different types of nodes. Data collected in this research has a rich array of node types, hence there is a possibility to create bimodal networks. There is a possibility of emergence of different identifiable patterns related to subversion and reinforcement in Islam and Muslims using these dynamic bimodal networks. Hence, pairwise analysis of two themes simultaneously can be realised creating bimodal networks. We can better understand the potential of a bimodal network through an example of collaboration networks. Collaboration networks are well studied examples in bibliometrics (Newman, 2001). This network provides several useful insights into questions like who collaborates with whom? Whether collaboration activity of one researcher affects future collaborations of others in the network? Co-authorship networks can answer some of these questions effectively, as the network directly connects collaborators who author a piece together. This is an example of a unimodal network where all the nodes are collaborators and edges represent their collaboration instances. But, answering some of the more complex questions of collaboration, requires a more nuanced view of the data. For example, if we want to know how an individual’s collaboration activity affects its future research patterns, a network consisting of authors and the piece of work on which they collaborated, will provide a better picture of the research pattern compared to the unimodal co-authorship network. In the present research, few bimodal networks have been designed to study different themes and forms of subversion.

The construction of aforementioned networks can be considered as an evolution process. The networks were initialised with simpler structures having few vertices joined by edges with certain probability. It has been already explained earlier that an edge represents the nature of interaction between vertices and the interaction between different pairs of vertices occur with differing intensities. Hence, a probability or weight is attached to the edge to capture the intensity of an

interaction. Starting with a simpler form, random edges are successively added to evolve more complex topologies. It has been observed in network analysis, that with increasing complexity and density of network, new attributes emerge from the structure. These emergent properties reveal hidden patterns and insights about the behaviour of the network.

### 3.2.3.1. Social Network Analysis

When nodes in a network represent people, communities, or organisations; and edges represent direct or indirect links between them then that network is called a Social Network. Social Network is an example of a classical network and therefore the vocabulary and concepts like – node, edge, centrality, betweenness, bridge, etc. -used in classical networks applies to Social Networks as well. When we analyse the patterns and attributes of a social network forged using Graph theory, statistics, and computational tools; we embark upon Social Network Analysis (SNA). The social formations investigated using SNA are not realist but nominalist (Knoke and Yang, 2019). A realist social structure is the one that exists in a physical reality for example marriage, family, kinship, caste, ethnic groups not to mention the non-traditional social groupings a group of gym pals, etc. ; whereas a nominalist social structure is the one that exists because of an awareness of being in a virtual group rather than being in a ‘real’ group’ (Knoke and Yang, 2019) for example social groupings of cyclists and runners, on a fitness app across the world.

While much of Social Science and Humanities research focuses on using attributional data, the SNA uses relational data to study the role of social actors, social ties, and their structural formations. Relational data is the data that unlike attributional data does not exist independently. It always exists in relation to another individual, event, or organisation. It is the relationship between two entities that gives rise to relational data. For example, SNA used to study social media by using data created by people by virtue of sharing, liking, and commenting on content is a relational data. Studying any social media content in isolation will not fall under the SNA data canon.

Social Networks have been of interest to researchers for a long time. Classic Sociologists have been interested in the questions that studying traditional social networks answer. With the advent of modern technology, it is the scale and scope of this analysis which has significantly changed. This has enabled social scientists to mine data at a scale that was unthinkable before. Besides using Mathematics and Statistics which the traditional social network analysts were already using; the use of Computer Science has further solidified the position of this tool in understanding how netizens interact, enact roles, practise social relations, and produce digital cultures. Hence, it has enabled

social scientists to bring new, non-traditional social formations enabled by digital technology into its scope. Studying both the local measures like centrality, bridge, eigenvector centrality of an individual node as well as global measures like density, Clustering coefficient are of importance for SNA to answer questions like which individuals are most powerful in the network (degree centrality measure), what are the attributes of a robust SN (scale-free network) in comparison to a weak SN (random network).

For the purpose of this research, SNA is an important method because individuals and online communities are a producer, distributor and consumers of internet memes and therefore studying the local and global behaviour and impact of these virtual social formations is vital to the study.

### 3.3. Thematic Analysis

Given the nature of the data which is a diverse set of internet memes consisting of transmedial visuals and text collected for this work, Thematic Analysis (TA) has been used as a method of analysis. Since the primary goal of this research is to find patterns of subversion in the discourse on Islam and Muslims through memetic and cultural practices, therefore TA was found to be the most appropriate method because the mesh of emerging themes provides an opportunity for meaning-making using derived tropes on digital discourse on Islam and Muslims. Several studies in media employ TA as a core method (for example, Drakett, et al. 2018). Unfortunately, often seen as a generic method or not grounded in theory, TA in fact can be useful in ‘critical framework to interrogate patterns within...social meaning around a topic’ (Clarke and Braun, 2016, para3) and ‘uncover issues’ (Hawkins, 2018).

Any analysis more so qualitative analysis entails making important judgements like thematically parsing data, identifying important contextual layers (s) in order to carry out the analysis. While the researcher itself becomes the instrument of research and therefore can't be objectively separated from the decisions that were taken it is important to clearly articulate the rationale behind those decisions and steps followed while conducting the research. Conducting an inductive thematic analysis entailed cleaning the data, familiarisation with data, exploring potential themes in the data, finalising and defining themes, and finally analysing the data (Clarke and Braun, 2016, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).

In all, 250 memes were manually collected from various websites from the internet by undertaking query searches on #Halalhumour and #muslimmeme. The reason #Halalhumour and #muslimmemes was chosen because the purpose of doing this analysis was to foreground the practice of memes in understanding everyday subversive activities of people with respect to ideas on Islam and Muslims using humour. While the big data collected from Twitter API for the purpose of conducting the Network analysis foregrounded the most politically hot issues of the present times like the narratives on returning western ISIS recruits and right to practice Hijab in the context of secularism in France, the small-scale collection of qualitative data helped get insights into the creation of memes as cultural artefacts in everyday settings. Therefore, while that analysis focused on the scale of memetic activity in order to identify the topics, the thematic analysis through the prism of individual practices went further to qualitatively understand the nature of self-representation and self-narration using creative visual, textual and humours elements used by ordinary Twitter users to resist, reinforce or subvert ideas on Islam and Muslims. While owing to the linguistic limitations the researcher was only open to choose the memes which used the

superimposed text in English, Hindi or Urdu memes, the data set contains almost all memes with English text that is because the data showed hardly any results of memes in Hindi or Urdu text. This might point to the truly global character of these memes. However, the memes especially produced by Muslims on their everyday practices had a lot of reference to Islamic theology rooted in Arabic language. These terms rooted in Islamic practices have been explained in detail during the analysis.

For example, the following meme (Figure 19) uses text in the English language however it mentions an Arabic work ‘Nasheed’. The direct and literal translation of the word means ‘song’ however, one needs to understand the Islamic context of the word in order to analyse this meme. It would not be simply enough to provide the literal translation for the word. Nasheed, here refers to the long and rich tradition of Islamic devotional songs in praise of Allah, the prophet Mohammad and his companions (Saeed, 2021). They are especially popular during Ramadan, the Islamic month considered holy by Muslims.

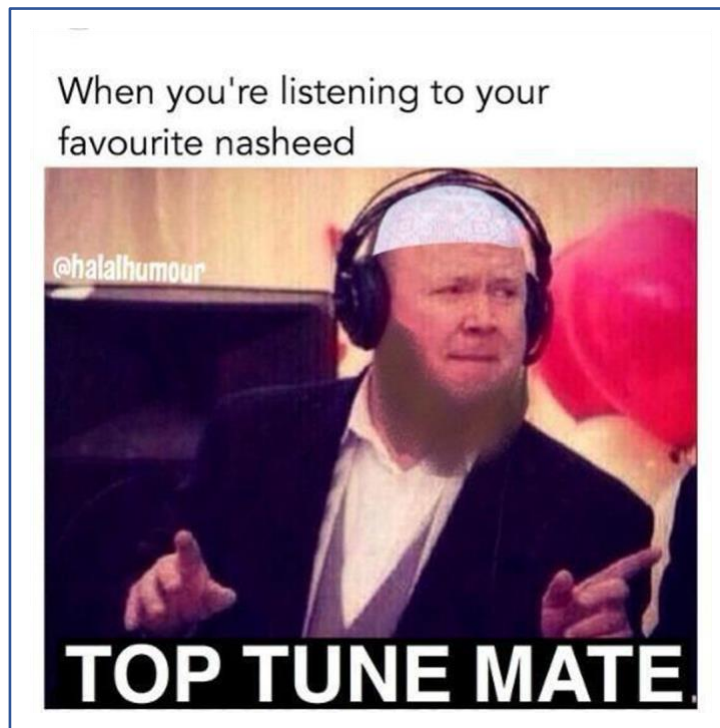


Figure 19: Everyday Lived Religion theme

The analysis of this meme which would fall under the ‘everyday lived religion’ theme would typically constitute the following steps:

1. Unpacking the formal elements of the meme: parsing the visual and textual elements.
2. Analysing the context of the formal elements by identifying the visual and textual signs, ‘anchorage’ and ‘relay’ borrowing from Roland Barthes (1964) Semiotic apparatus. ‘In this case the visual elements show a bearded Muslim man in *Taqiyah* (skullcap worn by Muslims) wearing headphones. The Islamic-style beard inspired by Hadiths which emphasise on beard with short moustache or no moustache in line with the tradition of the prophet and his companion plus the *Taqiyah* make it visibly clear that the man is depicted as a believer who follows the religiously prescribed traditional ways. That imagery is coupled with him wearing a headphone: a modern gadget and making a fun gesture with his hands in a way that is considered ‘cool’ in the popular culture. Moreover, the textual element “TOP TUNE MATE” is yet again adding the modern and popular cultural element to the meme. This coming together of the traditional and modern will then be situated in the larger context.
3. The next step would be meaning-making by bringing the formal and contextual elements together. Rehearsing why this meme is important in the context of present Wahabi/Salafi cultural undercurrents in the Islamic world which render music (*Mosiqi*) *haram* or not permissible including devotional practices like *Nasheed* and *Qawaali*. This would be then looked at through the prism of everyday lived religion, which exists in multiple forms and can’t be type casted in a dogmatic way believers are envisaged. This analysis would also discuss the element of active subversion of the dominant Wahabi narrative which argues strongly against any innovation (*Bidah*) in the Islamic ways of life which according to them should strictly copy the way of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions (*Sunnah*).
4. The last step to this qualitative analysis would be speculating on the creator and audience of the meme. The user is at the centre of understanding ‘self-narration and self-representation’ (Matar, 2019) and intentional ‘narrative worldbuilding’ (Sabry, 2021) and it is in this cause that the creator and its audience would be speculated based on the evidence provided in the data.



The collected data was dominated by two themes i.e., ‘Everyday Life and Lived Religion’ and ‘Terrorism and Security. The diversity of the data is such that the researcher had to further divide the theme into sub-themes based on both content and form. This researcher didn’t look for data on any particular theme, instead the data guided her to these themes. So, in short, the collected internet memes would be first assigned a theme and it is in that thematic perspective following the above steps the analysis would be carried out (Table 9).

*Table 9: Thematic Classification*

<b>Major Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Scope</b>
Everyday Life and Live Religion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Miscellaneous</li> <li>2. Halal-Haram</li> <li>3. Inshallah</li> <li>4. Ramadan</li> <li>5. Hijab</li> </ol>	This theme represents the everyday digital practices originating partially in the Islamic way of life and language. These memes show that the practice does not necessarily match the dogma.
Terrorism, Security and Sureveillance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Ordinary Muslim Man</i> Meme family: subverting Muslim stereotyping</li> <li>2. <i>Condescending Wonka</i> meme family: subverting Islam as a ‘religion of peace’</li> <li>3. <i>ISIS Crappy Collage Gradprix</i>: subverting ISIS’s terror agenda</li> <li>4. <i>Confession Bear memes</i>: subverting Muslim stereotyping</li> <li>5. <i>FBI Agent Watching You</i> Memes: subverting state surveillance practices.</li> </ol>	<p>This theme entails evidence of use of internet memes to reinforce, resist and subvert stereotypes about the Muslims.</p> <p>The sub-themes have been defined by the meme families given the large scale of data within each meme family.</p>

### 3.4.. Ethical consideration

Since the internet memes is the primary data for this research, its ethical concern mainly pertains to the ethics of collection of data from social media and its presentation. For this study the ethics of data concerns itself with dimensions of data which includes privacy, anonymity, transparency, consent, trust, and responsibility with respect to the data collection, curation, analysis and use (Floridi and Taddeo, 2016). A number of data management software were used to import data and form graphs and therefore, the ethical aspect also concerns itself with the ethics of algorithms of these software and the process of the decisions it takes in selecting a particular set of data over the other. Meaning the researcher had no control over the kind of data that has been culled by the software which can be seen as both a good and bad light. The fact that the researcher had no control over the data which was selected by the softwares meant that it was free from the researcher's interferences and possible biases at the same time it also means that some data which was collected was not directly relevant to the objective of the study.

Similarly, in the case of collecting memes from Twitter APIs, this researcher had no control over the algorithms of the APIs or the network generating software. Also, the number of memes returned were limited by the free data provided by the respective APIs.

Privacy and consent are important elements of data research as publication of individual data can expose them to harm and ridicule. There are arguments in favour of depersonalising the data before publishing them in research (William, Burnap and Sloan, 2017). When individuals choose to publish their content on social media platforms, they legally consent their data to be used by the third parties by formally agreeing with the terms and conditions of the platform. However, in the case of Cambridge Analytica, companies have been found to harvest this data unethically. Although there was no possibility of seeking informed consent due to the nature and size of data, the research method has been designed keeping in mind the fact that the publication of this work should not bring any harm to any individual. Therefore, the data which has been published by the individual publicly has only been used for analysis. No metadata concerning any user's activity or identity has been revealed at any stage in this research. Also, no sensitive data from the users' point of view has been published. Moreover, the profile details of individual users have been anonymised throughout except in cases where the individuals are either representing institutions or are seen as important digital influencers having a very high number of Twitter followers or a verified Twitter account which certifies that the account is authentic, notable, and active.

Another important aspect about ethics and data collected on Twitter is the authenticity of the

profile information provided by a regular user on Twitter. Since geographical tagging or location data has been used by this researcher to create graphs and to make some of the arguments using those findings, it is important to highlight that the users' location can't be authenticated by the researcher as users on Twitter self-declare their locations. The locations are not authenticated by Twitter and there are obviously accounts on Twitter which do not reveal their real location and identity for reasons as varied as: security, secrecy, anonymity, etc. including to evade intelligence agencies and government surveillance which can prosecute them for legitimate or illegitimate reasons depending on the kind of country these account users are operating from. Keeping this in mind terms like 'likely location' have been used during the presentation of findings and analysis of the data. This is important because to this researcher's mind any arguments made factoring the location from where the Tweets are emanating should be judged in the above light and other evidence should be provided to further corroborate or construct a reasonable argument using the location of the Tweets.

## 4. Results, Analysis and Discussions

### 4.1. Thematic Analysis

This section will answer **Research Question 2 (RQ2)** i.e., what is the nature of the interaction among the various elements (image, text, and context) of the internet memes on Islam and Muslims?

This task will be undertaken by analysing various elements of a meme and its context in relation to a theme that has been pre-assigned to that meme, or to a family of memes, either based on its/their form or content, or both. The following analysis intends to show patterns in the complexity of memes' aesthetics, language, context, and use, by using the theoretical tools that are relevant and that are provided by the frameworks offered by the 'procedure of everyday creativity' (de Certeau, 2011), memetics (Dawkins, 1976) and transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006, 2019).

This chapter will follow four steps in order to unpack the memes' structures and meanings.

- **Form:** The analysis will begin by describing and unpacking the formal elements, i.e., the visual and textual elements that are used in a meme, and that are often drawn from popular cultural symbols that are utilised in religion, politics, literature, films, video games, cartoons, etc. In this sense, the trans-medial aspects of a meme will be highlighted, along with the unique and incoherent origins of its elements. It is also important to mention here that we often tend to think of trans-medial elements as entities, ones that are borrowed only from conventional, established popular culture. However, a lot of memetic creativity happens around what is understood as 'Trash Culture' (Simon, 1999; Pye, 2011), which uses everyday material products to produce artefacts. There is very strong evidence of the aesthetics of trash in the content of the internet memes that were collected for this research. For example: the following meme uses images of material objects that can be categorised as 'trash' (Figure 20).

While the form of the internet memes commonly uses symbols from the popular cultural industry which are consumed globally, they at the same time also use material which are very local. It is only through the popularity of the internet meme that a particular symbol comes to acquire a global audience and appeal.



Figure 20: An example of the aesthetics of Trash

- Context:** In order to comment on contemporary issues, memes often make references to popular religious, political, cultural or historical events, as the popularity of the borrowed symbols becomes the strength of the adopter meme. This step in the analysis will focus on the articulation of that context, so that the possible meaning(s) of memes can be speculated upon. For example, the following meme (Figure 21) uses an iconic imagery of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad as a symbol of NATO's 2003 victory. The meme makes use of this imagery and replaces Saddam's face with another very popular internet meme that is called 'the Islamic Rage Boy'. In order to completely understand the purpose behind this meme, one needs to explain in detail the contexts and then to bring them together in order to speculate on the possible meanings of this internet meme. This process will be carried out for every meme that is analysed in the section that follows.



Figure 21: Fusion of Islamic Rage Boy and Saddam Statue meme

- Meaning-making: The form and context is brought together so as to speculate on a new meaning(s) that results from the bringing together of these elements and the context in which it is used.
- The creator of the meme and the audience: This step of the analysis will conjecture upon who might be its plausible creator, in terms of his/her religious identity (Muslim or non-Muslim), gender, political ideologies, etc. and the audience towards which the meme is directed. However, as have been mentioned in the Methodology section that one can only speculate about the creator or the memes or account users as the users' identity is self-declared on the platform. Therefore, except for the officially authenticated accounts by Twitter, this researcher cannot authenticate details regarding the identity of the Twitter account sharing or engaging with a particular meme. Moreover, as has been discussed in the review of literature chapter, there are dedicated meme creating websites where users create memes and then share them on various social media platforms, and it further gets circulated in the network by other users. Therefore, one can only conjecture, based on visual and textual evidence, who might have created a particular meme keeping what kind of audience in mind.

The memes have been divided into two major themes for the purpose of this analysis: 'Everyday Life and Lived Religion' and 'Terrorism, Security and Surveillance'. The sample data, which was collected using the key terms *#HalalHumour* and *#Muslimmemes*, arises from engagement with the everyday cultural context of Muslims, people's stance on extremism amongst Muslims, anti-Muslim discourse, terrorist events, surveillance on Muslims in the guise of national security and the practice of Muslim women wearing the hijab.

#### 4.1.1. Everyday Life and Lived Religion

Raymond Williams (2002), in his famous essay 'Culture Is Ordinary', reclaimed culture as something that not only belongs in the categories 'high' and 'low' but is something that is more fundamental to the everyday aspect of life – something that is 'lived' and not only something that hangs in galleries or is printed. Simply put, culture was conceived of as being part of everyday life by Raymond, and by many other cultural studies scholars who were responding to the dominant schools, like the Frankfurt School, who bemoaned the loss of 'culture' and the rise of 'mass culture' as a result of the acceleration of industrialization and capitalism in European societies. Scholars like Raymond Williams, Michel de Certeau and Stuart Hall were inspired by Marxist theorists, like Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, and yet made a case that moved beyond the structuralist exposition, and locating agency in the individual who, by using 'tactics' in the face of 'strategies' (de Certeau, 2011), navigates and subverts dominant structures.

The 'Everyday' has been used as an important analytical tool in cultural studies. At the same time, Certeau (2011) envisaged culture as being made up of 'modes of operation' and highlighted its often contradictory and 'coherent plurality', wherein what is being said, and how, is more important than the individual itself, who, Certeau believed, has been overemphasised in the enlightenment project that was espoused by Western academia. He talks about the importance of 'penetrating...[the] obscurity' of the everyday. Nancy Amermman's (2015) concept, 'Lived Religion', has also been employed in analysing the memes that follow.

This theme represents the everyday digital practices that originate partially from the Islamic ways of life and language which primarily consist of Quranic references and Arabic words in that context. These memes show that the practice does not necessarily match the dogma. The analysed data set also has memes that come from the non-Muslim's perspective drawn from their encounters with Islam and Muslims.

It has been further divided into five sub-themes: Miscellaneous, Halal-Haram, Inshallah, Ramadan and Hijab.

#### A. God's video game: an everyday navigation of the profane in order to reach *Jannah*

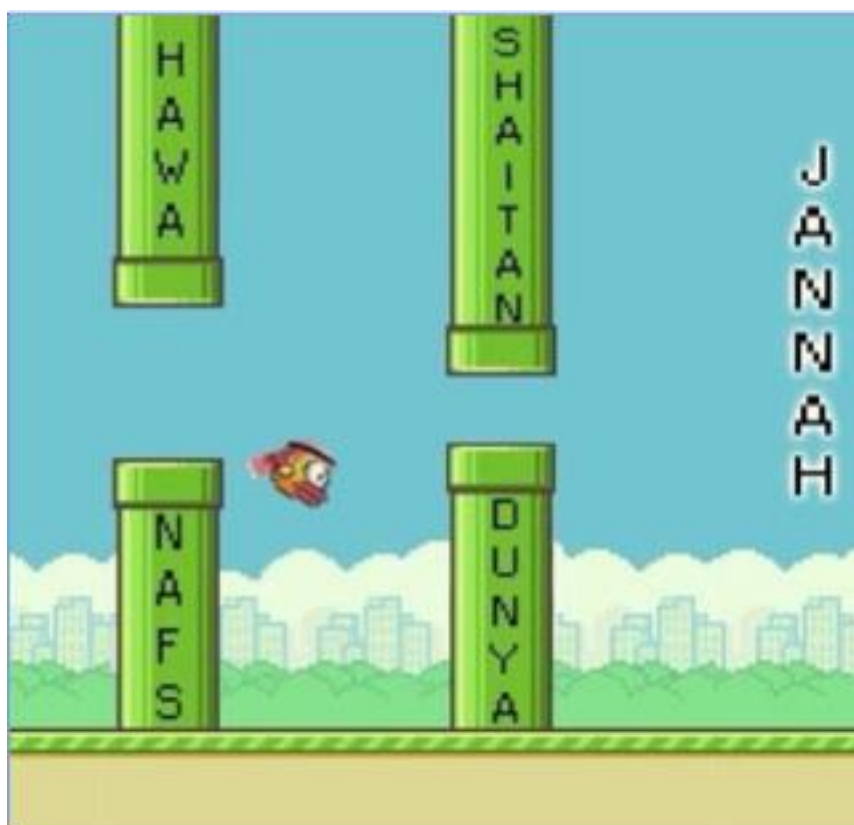


Figure 22: #halalhumour meme (Twitter)

**Form:** The meme shown in Figure 22, was shared on Twitter with the hashtag #*balalhumour*, and uses the imagery of a popular Vietnamese mobile video game, *Flappy Bird*, which is similar in graphic style to the *Super Mario* video games. Faby's image has been superimposed with *Kaffiyeh* – an Arab form of headgear, to give him a Muslim appearance. Originally, in the video game, the usual barriers that Faby faces are in the form of Warp pipes, which move constantly in order to obstruct his way forward, have been renamed using Arabic terms with Islamic connotations, like *Nafs*, which means self or ego; *Dunya*, meaning the material world; *Shaitan* meaning Satan; *Hawa*, meaning Eve. *Nafs*, *Dunya*, *Shaitan* and *Hawa* – are considered to be traps or deviations for a believer, and they have been widely warned against in Quranic teachings.

**Context and meaning-making:** The experience of having to figure out what is *halal* and *haram*, based on Islamic codes and dogmas, can be very demanding and taxing for practicing Muslims. The above meme draws a parallel between the protagonist of the game, Faby, who faces many barriers, in the form of green pipes, before reaching his goal in the game, with a Muslim man. In depicting a Muslim man in the guise of Faby, this meme uses an image from a popular video game to communicate some of the concerns and predicaments that a practicing Muslim may face with regard to his/her ultimate goal of seeking heaven, and how the journey is fraught with dangers akin to those faced by the protagonist of the game. A Muslim has to pass through all these barriers in order to ultimately reach *Jannah*, meaning heaven.

This meme possibly offers moment in which to take a humorous break, and a chance to celebrate a practicing Muslim's efforts in attempting to reach a worthy cause in his religious ideosphere. It affords a childlike innocence and a thrill through attempting a journey towards the ultimate goal of *Jannah*, since the relationship between God and the believer is often constructed as being that between a provider and a child.

When *Flappy Bird* was launched, in 2013, it became hugely popular, so much so that its developer chose to withdraw it as a result of its addictive effects. By using a popular symbol, with which many in the online community can instantly identify, the meme maker uses a familiar imagery to show the challenging experiences of a believer who has to navigate the various rules and regulations that must be followed in order to be a 'good' believer, ones that are often commanded by the clerical class, which, for much of the time sounds like an almost impossible task, given the proclivities of human nature. Using the imagery of this game brings in both a sense of humour and the guileless sincerity of a believer who must work hard in order to score well in God's designed video game.



While the ‘convention’ or the cultural agreement, on the interpretation of a ‘sign’, in this case a snapshot from the, *Flappy Bird* video game, in which the protagonist may simply be seen as an individual playing the video game; it is the use of the Arab headgear (the *Kaffiyeh*) which provides the ‘anchorage’ (Barthes, 1964) for the larger visual scheme by providing a context in which to interpret the image. After the viewer locates *Faby* wearing the Arab male headgear, we know for sure that the player is not just anyone but is specifically an Arab-Muslim man. This tunes the user into the Arab-Muslim context of the meme. And the superimposed texts, *Nafs, Dunya, Shaitan* and *Hawa*, act as the ‘relay’ (Barthes, 1964), by aiding in the relaying of the overall message in the meme. It is the coming together of these visual and textual signs that engenders a new and unique meaning for the use of these signs, which is, though, partially drawn from the constituent signs, but amounts to more than the sum of their meanings. In this sense, this meme also provides a rich example of intertextuality and transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006, 2019), wherein three diverse sets of media, i.e., a popular Vietnamese video game, Quranic teachings plus, a cultural practice in clothing, in the form of a form of Arab headgear, come together to narrate (possibly to self-narrate) the story of a believer about God’s own video game.

This meme seems to be entirely produced by and for Muslims, since the internal logic of the meme can only be understood by someone who not only understands the key Islamic concepts that are rooted in Quranic teaching, in the Hadiths and in Islamic history, but who also has experience or understanding of video game culture and practices.

### **B. Beard on a Straight Path (*Sirat al-Mustaqim*): an everyday practice of sporting an Islamic-beard**



Figure 23: #halalhumour meme example (Twitter)

**Form:** The meme in Figure 23 was shared using the hashtag #*balalhumour*, on Twitter, and it shows a bearded Muslim man, with a text at the top that reads: *When your beard is on the straight path more than you.* The text ends with a *Loudly Crying Face* emoji. There are three visual elements in the meme - the text, the emoji, and a close-up shot of a man with a very straight beard.

**Context and meaning-making:** In order to understand the meaning and humour that are implied in this meme, it is imperative to understand the Islamic connotation of the term ‘straight path’. The Arabic term for the ‘straight path’, which is mentioned thirty times in the Qur’an, is *Sirat al-Mustaqim*, which, according to the Oxford Islamic Dictionary (2020), refers to the proper conduct and the correct practices and beliefs in Islam. *Sirat al-Mustaqim* is part of the *Surah al-Fatiba*, one of the most important chapters of the Qur’an which is recited in all five of the prayers (*Salat*) that Muslims offer during a day, which basically means that there is an emphasis on praying to Allah, so that He may guide them on the ‘straight path’ – and the path which their prophet (Mohammad) and his companions trod is immense. It is an oft-used term amongst practising Muslims, and a higher aspiration to which many of them wish to work. This particular meme tries to create humour by comparing a Muslim man’s straightened beard that is more on its way along the ‘straight path’ than he himself is. The fact that the man is sporting an ‘Islamic beard’, which is typically accompanied by trimmed moustache, and not a regular beard, which has matching hair growth for the moustache, establishes the fact that the man is a devout observer of the *Sunnah*, which are the practices of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions or the way he conducted himself, because not all Muslims who sport a beard have this peculiar style which is linked to the Prophet Mohammad. It would be useful to mention here that, in the recent past, sporting a beard has also been perceived by some non-Muslims to be a sign of radicalisation amongst Muslims, on one hand, and, on the other, conservative Muslims have been accusing people who don’t observe it as having a weak *Imaan* or faith (Sondy, 2016). During the Mubarak-rule in Egypt, sporting such beards brought repercussions and action from the state (Khalil, 2013; Reuters, 2013). In that sense, an Islamic beard is not only a simple religious practice but has a history, which, of course, is continuing, of the ways in which it is perceived by others. Within Muslim communities it enjoys a larger social function, in which sporting a beard is seen as a sign of piety and virtue.

In this particular meme, the man has visibly straightened his beard by using grooming tools (like an electric straightener and hair gel), and therefore this joke that links his straight beard to the ‘straight path’ upon which the believer wishes to tread, creates the opportunity for humour by word play. The meme is, at the same time, by using a *Loudly Crying Face* emoji, mocking the character, because although self-grooming, personal hygiene and having a pleasant odour (*itr*) are

parts of the *Sunnah*, an excessive obsession with one's appearance is usually not associated with an ideal believer's image.

The dominant visual sign of a man with a straight Islamic beard which, by 'convention', could, in the absence of other signs, simply be interpreted as the sign of someone who is possibly an ideal and proud believer who follows the *Sunnah* in addition to the basic Quranic teachings, it is, however, the 'anchorage' that is provided by the *Loudly Crying Face* emoji which provides the context that communicates to the viewer that this is certainly not about celebrating the believer, and there is more to it, which is communicated using the 'relay', in the form of the text: *When your beard is on the straight path more than you*, and therefore conveys a meaning in mocking terms, using a central Islamic concept, possibly meaning that anyone who is practising excessive vanity, especially in the guise of their being a simple believer.

This meme can also be interpreted using the analytical tool of the 'everyday' use of internet memes and their use to control the form of an everyday religious practice, i.e., an Islamic beard. It is quite clear from the meme that it does not endorse the grooming of the beard and finds it almost an obstruction along the 'straight path' that is recommended in the Quran. This otherwise ordinary decision, to groom one's beard, has significance in the context of the present Islamic movement, Salafism, which promotes. The Salafist/Wahabis have been aggressively promoting and sporting a long, wild form of the beard (Khalili, 2013) and this meme can be seen to be endorsing it. As a result, the man in the meme, although rooted in *Sunnah* practice, which is considered an extra effort on the part of a believer as, according to Islamic beliefs, following the *Sunnah* is not obligatory (*wajib/fard*), however, it is recommended (*Mustahabb*); is mocked for being mindful of his Islamic 'looks', and because, while he is sporting a beard, he doesn't want it to look unkempt. This is an example of the use of internet memes to reinforce an already dominant Salafi ideology within various Islamic schools of thoughts.

That said, this meme can also be interpreted through the analytical lens of self-reflexivity and 'lived religion' (Ammerman, 2015), wherein the meme maker possibly wants to underplay the importance of rituals and the 'outer' forms of religion and, instead, wants to emphasise the real practice of 'the straight path' which, according to him, may exist independently of what you wear, what you eat, how you look; which are basically the ritual and material aspects of religion. In this sense, this meme challenges the puritanical religious movements which constrict the forms in which Islam is followed and that create exclusive groups among Muslims, which are based on the material and ritualistic practices rather than on its fundamental beliefs.

This meme, the researcher believes, must have been created by a Muslim, and it is meant for a Muslim user, because there is an exclusive meaning associated with a particular Islamic concept and this can mostly be understood by those people who have some basic knowledge of Islam.

**C. *Bismillah*: the everyday use of a magic word which can cause anything to become *Halal***

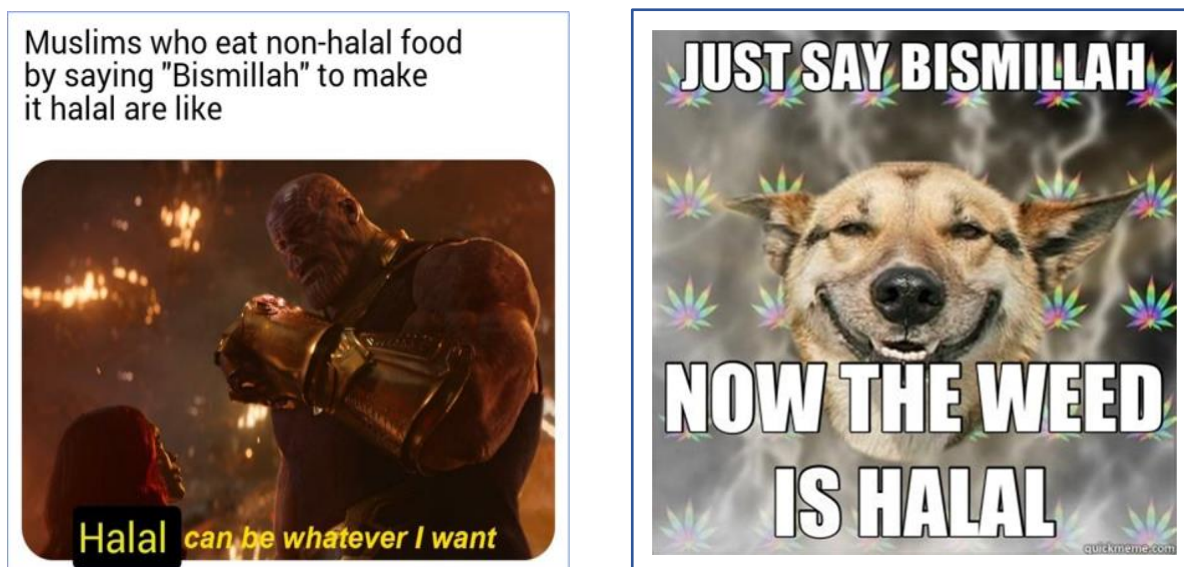


Figure 24: *Bismillah* meme (A & B)

**Form:** The above image (Figure 24A), which is part of a famous meme family that is called the *Reality Can Be Whatever I Want* screengrab, is from a 2018 Marvel movie *Avengers: Infinity Wars*, showing its characters, Thanos and his daughter, was shared on Tumblr on an account named “halalhumour”. The image of Thanos and his daughter is accompanied with two forms of text: one that is superimposed on the image itself by amending the original dialogue: “*I can be whatever I want*”, from the film, to *Halal, can be whatever I want*, and the other text, at the top of the meme’s frame “*Muslims who eat non-halal food by saying “Bismillah” to make it halal are like.*” The form of this meme uses the visual and textual signs from a single medium, a popular Hollywood animation film, entirely, and, in that sense, it does not show any signs of transmediality except, of course, for the Islamic reference to Halal practices.

**Context and meaning-making:** The dialogue, “*I can be whatever I want*”, is often used by the memers so as to depict double standards. This screengrab, in which the dialogue has been adapted to “*Halal, can be whatever I want*”, and the text at the top of the image, which says, “*Muslims who eat non-halal food by saying “Bismillah” to make it halal are like*” is possibly designed to poke fun at those people who are more relaxed about what is *Halal*, which means, what is permissible in Islam and what is not. This is possibly a joke on those people who do not adhere to the strict guidelines that are set by the theology in relation to what is *Halal* and *Haram* and who, instead, justify their choices in accordance with their convenience. It is believed by many

Muslims that if you start anything with the utterance “*Bismillah*”, which literally means “in the name of Allah”, then that thing or act automatically becomes *Halal*. It is useful to note that *Thanos*, who is a legendary Marvel Comics character who first appeared in 1976, before gaining global appeal as a result of his role in the *Avengers: Infinity Wars* movie, was chosen perhaps to emphasise the importance of observing what is *Halal* and *Haram* more ardently than people usually actually do. Since *Thanos* is a supervillain in the comics, it can be safely assumed that a believer who takes the practice of *Halal* casually is being portrayed as nothing short of a villain. This meme has the potential for humour because a scene from a famous movie has been adapted into an Islamic setting. It also indicates the over-emphasis and the advocacy for the following of religious practices in everyday settings.

The other reading of this meme may be that those who have double standards, in terms of following the Islamic teachings on *Halal* and misusing the term *Bismillah*, will come face to face with the fierce and merciless angels of hell. The *Avengers*’ figure here, could be interpreted as being made to look like a fearsome angel of hell – the punisher. This can be seen as the use of a meme to reassert religious dogmas by assuming that the meme is intended to convey this message.

The ‘relay’ (Barthes, 1964), which is provided by the adapted film dialogue “*Halal, can be whatever I want*”, can also be understood within the framework of lived religion (Ammerman, 2015), as the everyday use of a religious term “*Bismillah*” is used to negate the strict rules that apply around what is considered permissible according to religion. In a way, by using the term “*Bismillah*” in this sense, the user has used one religious concept to subvert another. The ‘*Bismillah* memes’ are a huge and popular meme category, one which is mostly used to navigate strict expectations within Islamic practices. For example, the meme in Figure 24B also corroborates the use of *Bismillah* to negate the expectation that one will only consume what is expected to be *Halal*.

These memes, in all probability, must have been created by a Muslim for Muslims, because it not only mentions the important Islamic practice of *Halal*, but also refers to a more everyday practiced ritual of using *Bismillah* to fulfil one’s duty to ensure that Muslims eat what is prescribed as being *Halal* food, to engage only in *Halal* practices, and that even if they are not sure if it is *Halal*, then the invocation “*Bismillah*” would make it one.

Another interpretation may also be that these memes are created by, and targeted at, Muslims who live in the diaspora, where halal meat is a multi-million business. In the Islamic world, all meat is halal. The rise of Salafism worldwide has also given an impetus to the Halal industry, one which is spread across products and services, but a major part of which comes from slaughtering animals according to Islamic practice in order to make it Halal. However, for this researcher, it is

the everyday use of “*Bismillah*”, used in a subversive way, that remains the most useful and interesting aspect of these memes.

#### D. Concert at Kaaba?

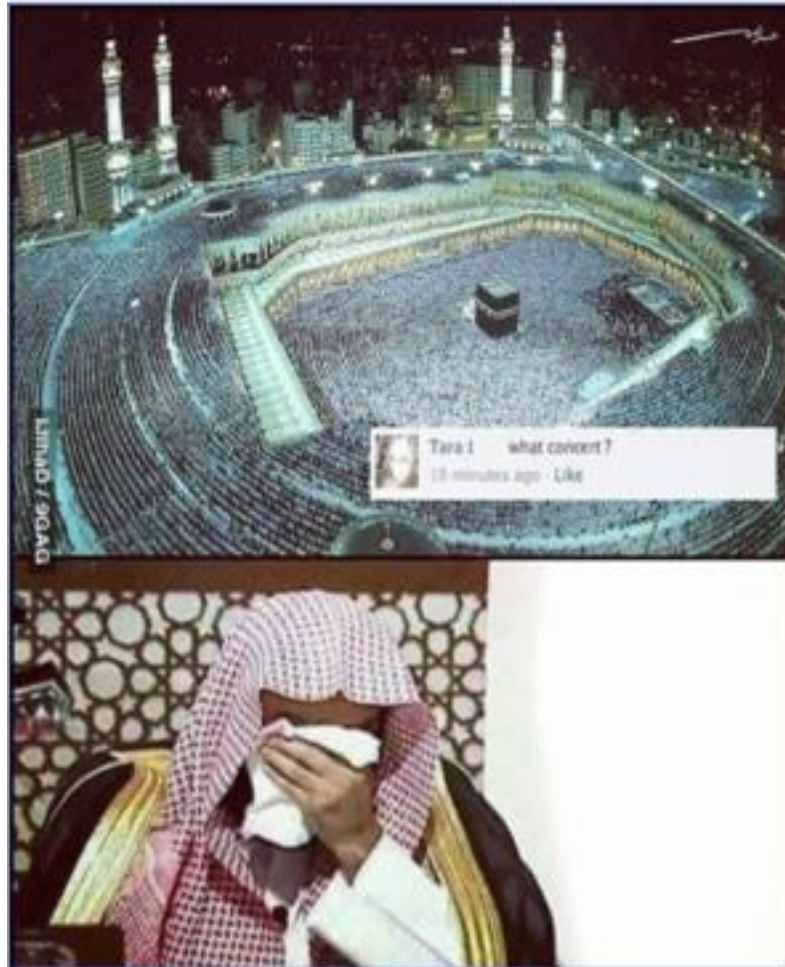


Figure 25: Hajj meme

Form: The Figure 25 meme has three elements. Two images- one of the circumambulations, or *Tawaf*, an important Islamic ritual that is performed throughout the year, however, it assumes a special significance and a greater scale, during the *Hajj*, at the Kaaba; and the other of a facepalming Arab Muslim man covering his face with a handkerchief in disappointment. The Kaaba’s image is superimposed by a screenshot of a Twitter comment, which asks – “what concert?” Both the visual and the text are drawn from user-generated content, and no part of this meme comes from any of the established popular cultural products.

**Context and meaning-making:** While the principal sign in the meme is the image of people performing Tawaf around the Kaaba, the second image, of a disappointed man, provides an ‘anchorage’ for the first image. The overall meaning of this meme is revealed through the superimposed Twitter comment, which acts as an ‘anchor’ by providing a connection between the two disparate images and by asking a question in respect of the *Tawaf* from a non-Muslim’s point of view, one who is not aware of the iconic imagery and principal rites of performing an Islamic pilgrimage that is central to the practice of Islam, and therefore of equating this ritual to a gig, which visually appears quite similar to the *Tawaf*, as when, at concerts, crowds encircle a star or a band in a similar fashion.

Equating an important Islamic ritual, which is performed by Muslims in Mecca, with a crowd attending a concert, is an attempt to generate humour by juxtaposing two popular rituals of our times, and how some people who are not Muslims, or who do not have any exposure to the Islamic imagery, might mistake this congregation for a music concert. The second image of a man who is wearing traditional Arabic attire, a man who is utterly disappointed at this comparison, given the importance of the place and the ritual in Islam, further adds to the humorous punch in the meme. This meme is perhaps also pointing towards two prominent symbols, around which the sea of humanity is ready to converge – religion and music (popular culture) – yet the sheer disbelief of the man in the second image shows how distant, and culturally apart, these two settings can be.

The use of a disappointed Muslim man suggests that this meme may have been created by a Muslim to present his point of view. However, it has a universal audience potential, since it is talking to, and involves, both Muslims and non- Muslims as its subjects.



## E. InshAllah memes



Figure 26: Inshallah meme (Twitter)

*InshAllah* is an Arabic word, which means “if Allah wills it”, and it is one of the everyday words that is frequently used amongst Muslims across the world. Its use is quite varied, thus affording its adoption in diverse situations. There are therefore a whole range of memes on “Inshallah” that display the diverse contexts in which the word can be used. For example, in Figure 26, meme no.1 illustrates a Muslim’s experience, a Muslim who, when s/he uses the word in a situation in which others, who are non-Muslims, may not understand its usage and may therefore give replies that can vary from the funny to the strange. This meme uses the popular American TV series, *Friends*’ characters to represent the audience for *InshAllah*, those who are confused at the use of this word. In using American TV stars, ones who are particularly popular with millennials globally, and not just in the States, the meme is trying to connect with a global young audience. The memes suggest that to some, this Arabic word, rooted in Islamic theology, may sound aesthetically pleasing, while others may wonder if one has used a disagreeable word. In using signs like “did you just speak Islam?”, “sick word”, perhaps the meme also mocks the ignorance of non-Muslims about Islam, especially in the context in which some of them are negatively ‘opinionated’ about it and, in that sense, the superimposed text (the set of questions beings asked on the use of InshAllah) becomes



the ‘relay’ for this particular meme. The text, which also says, “*Fami love that Language*” also suggests how some of the population in the Global North still find eastern cultures exotic (see Said, 1995). By generating humour in the cultural crosscurrents between Muslims and non-Muslims, this meme presents the very real encounters of a Muslim in everyday settings. This meme was perhaps created by a Muslim who lives in a more heterogenous context, and not in one of the Islamic theocratic states.

Meme No. 2 uses a popular memetic image of *Futurama Fry*, which is also known as the ‘*Not Sure Why*’ meme, and which uses a screengrab of Fry, one of the characters in the American animated science-fiction TV series *Futurama*. The screengrab is taken from a shot in which Fry squints his eyes during a dialogue with himself, that dialogue is superimposed, in the form of text, at both the top and bottom of the image. It always starts with “Not Sure...”. In this meme, the overlaid text on the image reads, “*Not sure if that was the real Inshallah – or an Arabic no*”. Similarly, Meme No. 4, in Figure 16, provides an example of the ‘*Y U NO*’ *Guy memes*, which typically use SMS language, without much care for grammar, in order to attract attention. The character in the meme has been identified with a Japanese Science fiction character: Gantz.

An important aspect of Memes No 2, 3 and 4 is that all of them point to the use of the term *Inshallah* as a device or a tactic with which to delay things. *Inshallah*, which is otherwise a concept deeply rooted in the Islamic belief in the power and will of Allah, is reduced to a word whose connotation is simply ‘No’. A Salafi Maulvi might even term this usage of *InshAllah* as being a *Kufr*, or *haram*, practice. This clearly indicates an aspect of everyday lived religion wherein religions and their lexicon, which in themselves are rigid and dogmatic institutions, become mutated at the level of the everyday so much so that their social meaning is itself transformed.

The memes above provide rich examples of transmediality in which, while the textual symbols which are also acting as ‘relays’ by which to communicate internal jokes about the use of the word *InshAllah* are constructed keeping in mind the everyday contexts, the visual imagery is drawn from popular media products that come from the American cultural industries.

These memes have been, in all probability, created by Muslims for Muslims, because *InshAllah* is less likely to be used as a communication device in secular spaces and/or with non-Muslim audiences.



Figure 27: Hybridization of InshAllah meme (Twitter)

Figure 27 is an example of a hybridisation in the Inshallah meme that uses two popular memes. The famous *Woman Yelling at a Cat* meme, in which *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* – a US reality TV series' cast members Taylor Armstrong and Kyle Richards's famous screengrab from the series, which is juxtaposed with another popular meme, called *Smudge the Cat*, in which a cat is sitting on a chair behind a dinner plate while wearing a confused expression. The cat is wearing a *Keffiyeh* and *Hijab* to represent it as a Muslim character. This is, yet again, a good example of transmedia storytelling in the form of the hybridisation of memes and symbols from different cultures coming together to forge a third meaning. The context of the usage of *InshAllah* clearly points to the subverted usage of the term, which otherwise connotes a religious belief, but has culturally come to mean something entirely different. It is highly likely that these memes were created by Muslims themselves, representing an everyday aspect of their culture. One of the memes contains a text which says, 'For context, *InshAllah* means "Hopefully", according to Google Translate'. This provides a strong 'relay' to the above meme, in terms of making its meaning very clear, which is done in order to create humour and to communicate this very distant meaning of *InshAllah*.

## F. Ramadan memes

Ramadan – the Islamic month that is considered holy by Muslims, is observed by fasting and abstinence throughout the whole month. Besides its religious significance, this is a big cultural occasion for Muslim families and societies, culminating in the biggest festival in Islam – *Eid al-Fitr*. Fasting and the other rituals that are related to Ramadan, like *Fajr* (which literally means “dawn” but is popularly used to signify the morning prayer), *Suhoor* (the morning meal immediately before the break of dawn and prior to the beginning of the fast), and *Iftar* (the evening meal eaten after sunset in order to break the day long fast), are used to create an opportunity for humour in everyday settings as social media team up with Ramadan memes. The use of existing popular memes to convey the spirit of Islam can be seen in Figures 28 and 29.

For example, in Figure 28, the image used in Meme No. 1 is a very famous meme, which is called *Forever Alone*, and which uses a comic face to express loneliness and dissatisfaction with life.



Figure 28: Ramadan memes (Twitter)

The text that is superimposed on the image says “*Ramadan – the only time I have a date every night*”, and this refers to the ritual of breaking the fast by eating dates during Iftar in Ramadan. Breaking the fast by eating a date holds special importance in Ramadan, as it is the way that the Prophet

Mohammad broke his fast and that is why it is an important ritual for the practicing Muslims. The double entendre is exploited in the use of the word ‘date’, which also means a person you are meeting with some romantic interest.

Meme No. 2 uses a popular *Scumbag Steve* meme, which consists of a guy who is dressed in baggy clothes and a sideways fitted cap, which is also popularly called a *Scumbag Hat*, to depict a blasé character who, in this case, wakes up for *Subhoor* in order to eat, but does not offer the *Fajr* prayer. Since *Subhoor* happens immediately before the time for the *Fajr* prayer, and usually Muslims offer morning prayer after eating *Subhoor* there are always people who go back to sleep after eating the meal. This meme is a light-hearted joke on them.

Meme No. 3 uses a screengrab of a ‘mind-blown reaction’ of Joey Tribiani from the American cult TV series *Friends* being shocked at learning that Muslims do not even drink water during fasting. The text on the meme says, “*non-Muslims be like – not even water!?!?!?!?*” Many religions prescribe fasting, but not having even water during fasting is, perhaps, unique to Islam. Usually, non-Muslims find this quite incredible, given the fact that Ramadan fasts are observed in some of the very hot regions of the world. The way in which the punctuation marks have been used, with no regard for grammar, is also typical of the meme language culture.

Meme No. 4, the *Peter Parker Crying* meme, featuring the actor Toby Maguire from the 2002 film *Spider Man*’s reaction to his uncle's death, is used to express a devastated man who has missed the two most important meals during Ramadan – dinner and *Subhoor* -- given the fact that, as a Muslim, he is expected to resume his fast the following day. In a fasting ritual that lasts for a month the importance of these two meals cannot be overstressed, and the Muslims who observe Ramadan would easily be able to get the joke here.

All the memes above must have been created by Muslims, as there is an internal logic that is rooted in the Islamic practices, a knowledge of which is required in order to generate and understand them. The fact that a significant Islamic practice is used to create humour in the context of romantic relationships provides evidence of lived religion, as opposed to the serious-mindedness in a narrow sense that is promoted by the Salafis.



Figure 29: Spirit of Islam (Twitter)

Meme No. 2 is a *Surprised Koala* meme, which typically carries a photograph of a Koala eating Eucalyptus leaves. The memers use this photo to express surprise with playfulness. In this particular Ramadan meme, the *Surprised Koala* is depicting an impatient fasting Muslim who cannot wait anymore for *Iftar*, because of hunger and thirst, and who has gawkily had something to eat immediately before the time to eat, until someone pointed it out. The Koala asks, in the meme's caption, "What do you mean – its not Iftar time yet?". Muslims can relate to this meme, because when one is fasting there are so many gourmet distractions in the outer world, and it is a matter of great pride and unwavering resolve for Muslims to continue fasting in the face of thirst and hunger. However, there are instances when the young who are new to the ritual make an innocent gaffe and then feel utterly sorry for themselves, because, for a believer, all the day's hard work has been wasted by accidental eating or drinking. The *Surprised Koala's* expressions here represent a loser who has not been able to keep his fast, despite his/her all day-long abstinence, and this therefore creates humour for Muslims.

Meme No. 7 is a clear and strong example of lived religion. The text used in the meme says, "Ramadan is coming soon – Time for the Playboys to turn into Prayboys and the Barbies into Hijabis." The binary of the profane and the sacred that has been highlighted by the meme's creator in using Playboy vs Prayboy and Barbie vs Hijabi provides evidence of 'coherent plurality' which

is often contradictory, as Certeau (2011) discusses in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

Meme No. 8, in Figure 29, is a meme on the American President, Donald Trump, who is one of the memers' favourite characters in the recent past. He has been widely criticised for his controversial executive orders, like the proposal to build a wall on the Mexican border in order to check illegal immigration, withdrawing from the Transpacific Partnership ending a free trade deal, ending a long-standing refugee programme, etc. Trump's signing of the executive order and holding it up for the press, and it has become a popular meme, and has been adapted both to mock Trump and to raise other issues. In this case, it has been used to wish Ramadan Mubarak. This holds a special meaning because Trump is seen by many as being biased against Muslims. By using his image in order to give greetings for Ramadan, the meme is ridiculing him and his perceived hatred of Muslims.

Meme No. 9, in Figure 29, is a popular meme called *Being Bad Luck Brian*, featuring Kyle Craven – an American blond, white guy with a funny brace-laced smile, in a polo t-shirt and plaid sweater, accompanied by the text at both the top and bottom of the photograph. The meme stands for someone who has been unlucky in a funny manner. This adaptation of *Being Bad Luck Brian* is used to poke fun at someone who stays up all night during Ramadan, and falls asleep just before *Subhoor*, which is the time at dawn at which you eat before starting a new fast. Since it is the only meal, you are going to have before a day-long fast, someone missing it is therefore seen as being utterly bad luck, but in a humorous way.

## **G. Hijab Memes**

Women have been an important part in the public discourse on Islam and Muslims. Although most religions discriminate against women, one finds Islam to be leading in being criticised for treating its women regressively. This may be a result of the unfair regulations relating to Muslim women in the Middle Eastern countries where, until recently, a female could not even drive without an escort, or may be simply because of the disproportionate focus on Islam internationally. *Purdah* (covering) practices, like the Hijab, especially in Western countries (particularly in France) have also led to these narratives, in which the Hijab is seen as a sign of the oppression and subjugation of Muslim women.





Figure 30: Hijab memes [A,B,C] (Twitter)

There have been voices, from many quarters, who have expressed strong opinions on Muslim women, e.g., feminists, critiques of Islam, including an identity assertion from among Muslim women themselves, defending their own choices as practicing Muslims. Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian-American scholar who is known for her many celebrated works, such as *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992), locates the West's problem with the Hijab in the European quest to portray itself as 'civilised' by creating the Other, who is 'uncivilised' so, according to Ahmed, the veil became the '...emblem of how uncivilised Islam was...' in comparison to the 'civilised Europeans'. According to Tippett (2006), Ahmed argues that throughout their colonial history Europeans always needed the 'inferior other' in order to feel 'superior'. The veil, in the sense of a head covering, she claims is a gender-neutral dress code that existed for everyone in the Arab world. However, it is the face covering that she says was traditionally practised only by upper class women in Arabia and not all women.

Figure 30 shows the examples of memes offers a glimpse of the memetic activity online by Muslim women. The meme in Figure 30A shows a woman in a *Burqa*, which is an Arabic word for a garment that covers the woman from head to toe. The text says, "Niqabi's (sic) be like – *Can't see the haters*". 'Niqab' is an Arabic word for the cloth covering the face. The subject of this meme is the Islamic practice of women covering their body in front of *non-Mahram* (in both public and private spaces) – people who they can technically be permitted to marry. Many traditions and religions prescribe the covering of a woman's body in public spaces, for example, Christian nuns, however this practice is comparatively more widespread amongst ordinary Muslim women, who are not necessarily part of any religious organisation and practice the wearing of the Hijab in their everyday lives. Moreover, Muslims do not advocate *Purdah* as a tradition but, rather, as a religious practice that is ordained by God and that is therefore non-negotiable. Many Islamic countries mandate for the compulsory wearing of some form of the veil. For example, it is obligatory for

Muslim women to wear an *Abaya* in Saudi Arabia, and it was only in 2019 that this condition was dropped for foreigners. Similarly, in Iran, it became mandatory to wear the Hijab or to cover the heads of women after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. A lot of Iranian women can be seen wearing the *Chador*, another form of Islamic veil. The *Hijab*, *Burqa*, *Abaya*, *Chador* and the *Niqab*; have been at the centre of a debate in the post 9/11 world. Some countries have gone to the extent of banning the wearing of the *Burqa* or the covering of the face, either because it goes against their principle of secularism, according to which no religious symbol should be displayed in public, or for security reasons. The first country to do so was France, which was soon followed by people in many other countries demanding a ban (Gouveia, 2016). At least, 17 European countries ban the covering of the face in some form or other (The Economist, 2019) Boris Johnson, the present PM of UK had termed the women who donned the garment “letter boxes” “bank robbers” and called the practice “oppressive” and “ridiculous” (Johnson, 2018). Some Muslim women term this phenomenon ‘Hijab-shaming’ (Fatima, 2020), and have reported having experienced discrimination and racism due to veiling (Rahmat, Chambers, Wakewich, 2016). Feminists have been sharply divided on this issue, while some term the veil a continuation of the oppression of women, others have advocated the safeguarding of the principle of liberty and the right to choose for those who choose to wear it, even when the state does not enforce it. However, the anti-veil feminists argue that, even when a woman has a so-called choice, family and religion, as dominant institutions, enforce it, and therefore we have to take the choice argument with some caution. The meme in Figure 35 has clearly been created by Muslim women who are defending their right to choose. These memes are directly addressing those who denounce this dress code and who think Muslim women have been oppressed for centuries under this patriarchal tool under the guise of religious obligation. The text on the meme in Figure 30B, says “*Forgot to be oppressed – too busy being awesome*” and the meme shows a stylish and confident Muslim woman donning the *Hijab*. Many Muslim women wear the veil as an assertion of their political and religious identity.

In the meme in Figure 30C, which must have originally been a Tweet, an opportunity for humour is created by making a cat wear a *Hijab*. The visual elements in the meme – the frame of a Tweet, a mobile phone screenshot, a Tweet text, an image of a cat wearing a *Hijab*, are all placed together to convey an everyday space for an unusual Hijabi. The tweet text on the meme reads, “*Mashallah this cat converted to Islam and now wears a Hijab. Her name is Catija.*” Although, the anthropomorphism involved in making a cat wear a *Hijab* affords an opportunity for humour in itself, the real strength of the meme comes with the play on words in ‘Catija’. The name ‘Catija’ has a similar sound to ‘Khadija’, one of the most important women in Islam. Khadija was the first wife of the Prophet Mohammad, and she is considered to be the first person to have accepted Islam and Mohammad as the chosen messenger (Zeidan, 2020). Popularly known as *Ummul Momineen*, meaning the



‘Mother of Believers’, Khadija is unarguably the most revered woman in Islam. Khadija is also a popular name given by Muslims to their daughters in loving memory of the Prophet’s first wife. Any Muslim can thus readily understand the play of words in ‘Catija’. This meme, it seems, is not intended for an external audience, since one needs some basic understanding of Islamic history to understand both the intended word play and the pun here.

#### 4.1.2. Terrorism, Security & Surveillance

A lot has been written about Terrorism and Islam, the introductory chapter of this thesis discussed the conception and creation of the Green enemy after the Red enemy fell in the wake of dissolution of the Soviet Union. The works of scholars like Samuel P. Huntington (*Clash of Civilisation and the Remaking of World Order*, 1993) have provided the intellectual apparatus for the theory of an imminent clash between ‘them’ and ‘us’ against the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the Gulf Wars in the Arabian Peninsula, and the mass media’s global reach through satellite and internet communication. Media scholarship is teeming with studies that provide rich evidence of the negative framing of both Islam and Muslims, especially in the mass media of the global North, which have internalised the foreign policy goals of their home countries’ respective governments and presented the ‘War on Terror’, after 9/11, as the fight between the ‘Christian world’ and the Muslims/Arabs/Islam ( see Powell, 2011; Matthes and Ahmed, 2016; Kearns, Betus and Lemieux, 2019; Dolliver and Kearns, 2019). This manufactured narrative about Muslims being a threat to the security of nation states, has also led to the justification for increased surveillance of them. Erdoan Shipoli, in his book *Islam, Securitization and US Foreign Policy* (2018), argues, based on his analysis of four US presidents’ discourse on Islam, starting with George W. Bush, that Islam has been presented as the “ultimate other” in Presidential discourse, and its securitisation has been legitimised by linking Islam to security threats. However, Mohamed Natheem Hendricks, in his book *Manufacturing Terrorism in Africa: The Securitisation of South African Muslims* (2020), provides evidence of the local South-African press, post 9/11, importing the ‘western-centred security discourse’. His work foregrounds the role of non-state actors in the securitisation of Islam and Muslims. The following section provides examples of the digital disruption of this securitisation by Muslims in their everyday digital settings.

The following theme is broadly divided into two parts:

1. Terrorism, which is further divided into small sections based on the established meme families, namely, *Ordinary Muslim Man*, *Condescending Wonka/Creepy Wonka*, *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix* and *Confession Bear*.
2. Security and Surveillance – *FBI agent/Government agent watching me*

### A. Theme – Terrorism (*Ordinary Muslim Man*)

The *Ordinary Muslim Man* meme family has manifested itself as a meme family which challenges the stereotypes about Muslims in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The *Ordinary Muslim Man* meme is typically defined as an ‘...advice animal image macro series’ that features a smiling man who can be



Figure 31: Ordinary Muslim Man memes (Twitter)

easily identified as a Muslim from his attire, which includes a Muslim *Taqiyah* hat. An ‘image macro’ means any image which is used in the background with a superimposed text over it, and an ‘advice animal’ image macro is a kind of meme which uses animals (including humans) as a background

image with a captioned text over it (Know Your Meme, 2019).

In the case of ‘The Ordinary Muslim Man’ meme, the captioned text is always in the ‘bait-and-switch’ style, meaning that the first line will trick us into believing one thing, and the second will be the antithesis of it. One finds that the various elements of a meme have disconnected histories and contexts, and yet they all come together to make a unique media-mix. In this case, the photo was originally taken by a Pakistani photographer in 2007. In January 2011, a Reddit handler first used it to create a meme, and since then numerous derivatives of these memes can be found on the internet. The example of the *Ordinary Muslim Man* meme family helps us to understand the ability of a meme to create offspring with mutations (Dawkins, 1976). *Ordinary Muslim Man* is a meme family whose member memes relate to each other both thematically and visually, yet every meme from the family is unique. It has been observed, in the case of internet memes, that the most popular memes exist as meme families, which share some traits with other memes, and this corroborates Dawkins’ (1976) proposition of successful memes forging memplexes that are akin to gene-plex. The creator of the meme changes some parts of that meme, which imparts into it a unique character, yet this change is not made to the extent that it is completely divorced from the original meme family. The mutated meme can be easily identified as being a part of a particular meme family. In fact, the meme family often stands for a thematic message in itself which, in this case, challenges the stereotypes of Muslims, especially as extremists and terrorists. This meme family depicts the everyday context of an ordinary Muslim man’s life, in which the bait, in the form of an overlaid text, represents how a Muslim man is seen by ‘Others’, and the switch provides a humorous puncturing of that belief.



Figure 32: Ordinary Muslim Man memes (Twitter)

As you can see in Figures 31 and 32, the baits signify the popular stereotypes of Muslims and the switch is a surprise anti-climax to the original statement, which is set in the everyday cultural practices of any common person, and therefore tries to present Muslims as regular people, rather than as religious bigots, which is how many ill-founded representations attempt to portray them. For example – ‘Anthrax’ – which has been seen as an important bioterrorism tool – has been in the news, as some countries have purportedly tried to use it as a bio-weapon against their enemies. However, Anthrax is also the name of a popular American heavy metal band. The meme makers have used this co-incidence as part of their bait, and then switch the style by creatively constructing the legend – *“I sent my neighbourhood some anthrax – on YouTube, they love heavy metal.”*

While a sign in the form of an image of a Muslim man, from a typical South Asian Islamic outlook, acts as a ‘convention’, which perhaps leads the audience to perceive the man as being an extremist, the first statement, which is the bait in these memes, acts as an ‘anchor’ that further provides the context to the image. The bait corroborates the stereotype which the meme is trying to disrupt and, finally, the Switch acts as ‘anchorage’, which completely changes the meaning of the meme.

The following are a few examples of the Bait and Switch punches that are used in the *Ordinary Muslim Man* memes (Table 10):

Table 10: Bait and Switch punch

<b>Bait</b>	<b>Switch</b>	<b>Challenged Stereotype</b>
I'm going to blow you up balloon animals for	Some  your party	Muslims are suicide bombers
That building is going down for its beautiful	In history  architecture	Muslims are terrorists who endorsed 9/11
I am da bomb	At making falafels	Muslims are suicide bombers
I won't rest until every American is dead		Set on using green energy Muslims hate Americans
Let's wage war against homelessness,	Poverty,  hunger & drugs	Muslims have waged a war against non-believers
I want all Americans to die	And live a healthy lifestyle	Muslims hate Americans
The holocaust didn't happen country, it took	In a Muslim  place in Christen Europe	Muslims hate Jews

## **B. Theme – Terrorism (*Condescending Wonka/Creepy Wonka*)**

The same stereotype has been countered by another popular meme style, which is called *Condescending Wonka/Creepy Wonka* – which form an advice animals' image macro series. It features a screengrab of Gene Wilder from his 1971 film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. The meme



first came onto the online platforms in 2011 and has since been seen to have shown a notable spreading on all of the major meme sharing platforms. It has been used in a variety of contexts, including in relation to the topics of Islam and Muslims. The caption on the meme is typically used in a sarcastic and patronising way, by asking a question of the viewer, drawing on the character of Gene Wilder in the film, in which he interacts with the children who are visiting his chocolate factory. As in the case of the *Ordinary Muslim Man* memes, the caption text is typically on both the top and bottom of the meme, however, the style, as mentioned above, is not that of bait-and-switch, but, rather, it frames popular views on Islam and/or Muslims in the form of a question, and then answers that question with a disruptive piece of information that the meme maker wants to put out to counter the popular view.



Figure 33: Creepy Wonka memes (Twitter)

For example, in Figure 33, the caption says: “*Oh the media tells the truth about Islam and Muslims?- tell me what do you think of the journalists who lost their jobs for trying to report the violence against Muslims in Burma, Israel and much more, that is even if you knew that before*”, indicating the repressive treatment of

journalists in Myanmar, which is witnessing violence leading to the deaths and displacement of scores of Rohingya Muslims in the country. Two journalists, in 2019, were sentenced to 7 years imprisonment by the Myanmar courts for reporting the killings of Muslims. They were later pardoned, after a massive international campaign for their release, having spent 500 days in prison. This was a warning for other journalists who were considering reporting on the injustice that was being meted out to Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Alongside Myanmar, the meme points to the case of Israel, and the repression that Palestinian and some Israeli journalists face for reporting on events in the West Bank and on the Gaza Strip. Reporters Without Borders – an organisation that is active in indexing press freedom across the world-- has been reporting upon the harassment of Palestinian journalists by the use of administrative detentions, under which the journalists can be held in detention indefinitely and without a formal charge, on the basis of ‘confidential’ evidence, for the alleged inciting of violence, the use of live rounds in the protests, which exposes journalists to serious injuries, the deaths of journalists, for instance, the killing of two Palestinian journalist by the Israel Defence Forces’ snipers while they were covering demonstrations, such as the “March of Return” in the Gaza Strip in March, 2018. The Palestinian issue, important as it is for several reasons, is primarily a territorial issue, but it is seen by many, to be a clash between Jews and Muslims, and it therefore invokes reactions, globally, from Muslims and Jews alike. In this case, a popular symbol from an American film is being juxtaposed with a message about Asian countries. It is typical in meme culture to bring together elements from diverse cultures and to give them a new meaning.

While the example above challenged the negative view on Islam and Muslims, the *Condescending Wonka* meme family, has been found to be used mostly by people in order to criticise Islam and Muslims.

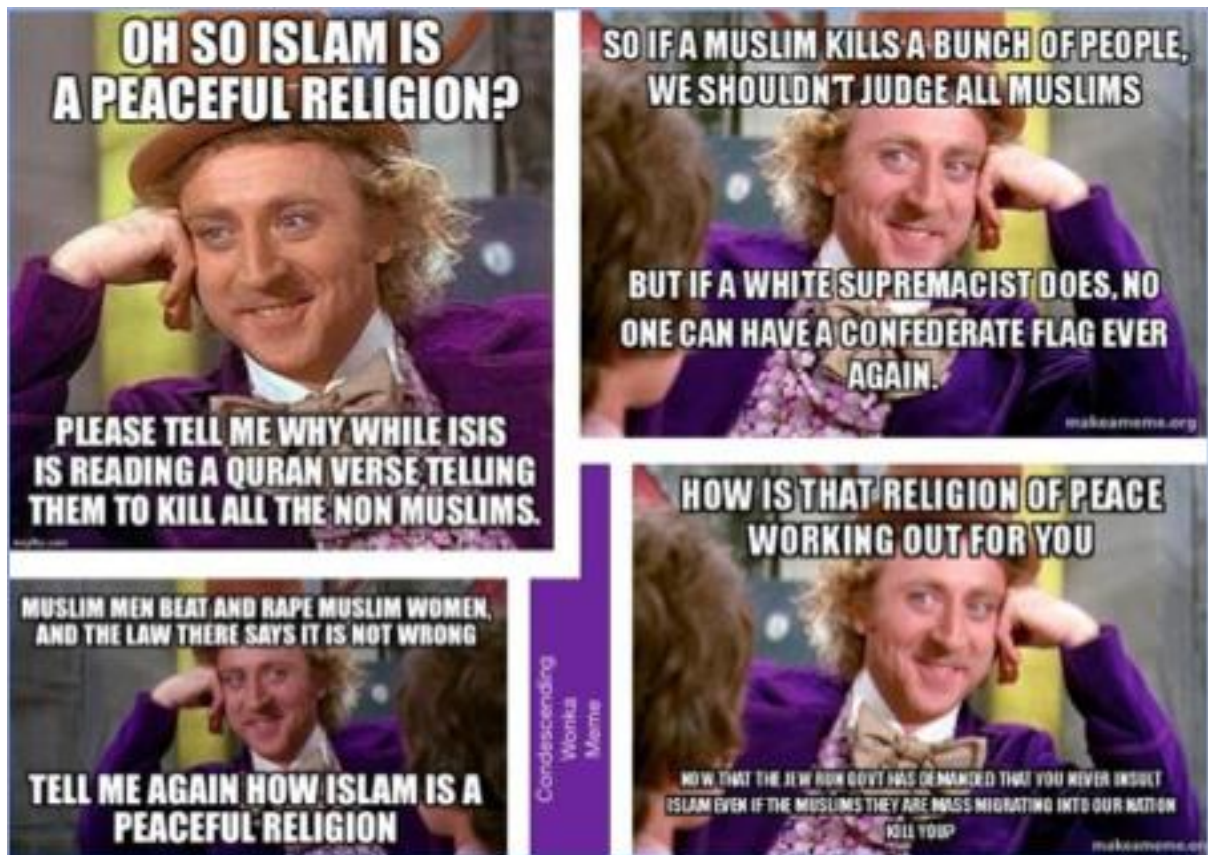


Figure 34: Condescending Wonka meme (Twitter)

For example, in Figure 34, the text in the first part of the caption sarcastically alludes to Islam as being the religion of peace, as its followers often draw attention to the fact that Islam is derived from an Arabic word ‘*Salam*’, which literally means peace. Many people derisively refer to Islam as a religion of peace. The text on the meme says, “*Oh so Islam is a peaceful religion? – please tell me why while ISIS is reading a Quran verse telling them to kill all the non-Muslims.*” Here, Islam – a ‘peaceful’ religion has been referred to in reference to a fanatical organisation: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is also known by the names IS and Daesh. They are infamous for the brutal style of their violence, which is undertaken in the name of Islam. The interpretation of Islamic verses to justify their own heinous crimes has led to a critique of the Islam question and some of the fundamental tenets of Islam, especially in respect of the concept of Kafir (or infidels) in the religion, and how they should be treated. Islam has been sardonically referred to as a ‘peaceful religion’ in another meme, in the context of violence against women. Quoting a certain interpretation of a verse in the *An-Nisa* chapter of the Qur’an. the critics of Islam claim that Islam justifies violence against women in matrimony. Alluding to this, the caption of the meme says – “*Muslim men beat and rape Muslim women, and the law there says it is not wrong – tell me again how Islam is a peaceful religion.*”



In another *Condescending Wonka* meme, which targets Muslims, the caption says: “*If a Muslim kills a bunch of people we shouldn’t judge all Muslims – but if a white supremacist does, no one can have a confederate flag ever again.*” this meme is making a case for the use of the Confederate flag, which was the flag of the Confederacy, which was a group of states in 1860-61 who seceded from the United States in support of slavery, eventually leading to the American Civil War. In modern times, its use is controversial, as it is seen as a symbol of White Supremacy and Racism. The meme mentions that, despite the gruesome acts of many terrorist organisations that are led by Muslims, some intellectuals advocate that one shouldn’t blame or judge all Muslims. However, the same people employ different criteria when it comes to whites, as any use of the Confederate flag, which is still proudly hoisted by many Southerners in the United States as a symbol of their cultural heritage and sacrifice during the American Civil War, and which is automatically seen as a practice of White Supremacy and Racism.

Most of the memes above are trying to subvert the narrative that is often expounded by Muslims who present Islam as a ‘religion of peace’ in the face of being charged as it being aggressive and violent.

### **C. Theme – Terrorism (*ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix*)**

ISIS evokes a range of emotions in people. This is also reflected in the meme culture online. ISIS is amongst the most memed topics relating to Islam and Muslims in the meme community. One of the memes in the ISIS memes series is known by the name: *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix* (Figure 24), and it started spreading after events relating to the capture and consequent murder of the Japanese hostages, Kenji Goto and Haruna Yokowa, in January 2015. ISIS released a video of the abducted hostages and demanded \$200 million in ransom within seventy-two hours, failing receipt of which they threatened to behead them. The reaction of the Japanese people was surprising, because instead of demanding that their government negotiate with the terrorists, or of expressing anger at ISIS, they started ridiculing it by creating memes using photoshop techniques on an image grab of the two hostages, with a masked militant holding a knife in his hand. This was soon followed by a hashtag #ISISCrappyCollageGrandPrix on Twitter, which was mainly put up by Japanese users. They started tagging the known ISIS Twitter accounts in their tweets in order to mock them. Eventually this trend went viral beyond the Japanese Twittersphere, and other netizens from outside Japan also started sharing photoshopped parody images of the original screen grab. Following the breakdown of the negotiations between the Japanese government and the terrorists, the hostages were brutally murdered. This was a rare occasion on which one found Japanese netizens participating in creating memes on ISIS or on the events in the Middle East. This digital

event was thus unique ISIS which intended to use the digital technology to create terror by releasing the video on YouTube and threatening to murder the hostage, instead made people use the digital platforms, like Twitter and Photoshop, to counter their hate agenda by employing humour, even in the face of such a dark and tense reality.

The sample of these memes displayed in Figures 35, 36 and 37 clearly shows the sheer creativity and imagination of netizens. A lot of these memes had Japanese language text, which this researcher is unable to decipher but there are a whole lot of memes under this banner that are without any text, and that draw from the symbols of international popular culture. For example, Meme 3, in Figure 35(3), uses a popular meme that is known as *Kim Jong-un watching The Interview*. This is one of the popular memes in the Kim Jong-un (the North Korean dictator) meme series. This meme is trying to convey that someone as distant as the North Korean dictator is also keenly watching and enjoying the events unfold in this ISIS led drama in a manner that is similar to the interest that was generated in North Korea by the 2014 American film *The Interview*, which was based on a plot to kill Kim Jong-un.

The text in Meme No. 1, in Figure 35, says “Sushi Eating Contest Final Championship”, and displays the flags of ISIS and Japan in the background, with a Sushi plate – a famous Japanese delicacy – in the hand of the terrorist who is seen in the screengrab. Meme No. 2 photoshops the militant’s image, with a Mickey Mouse costume, standing against the backdrop of Disneyland. This meme family also provides rich evidence of ‘Trash Culture’ (Simon, 1999; Pye, 2011), which uses everyday material to create digital artefacts. The examples that follow show how this meme family is using a diverse set of unrelated material (‘trash’) to produce meaning and humour. These memes also display excellent transmedia storytelling techniques in which some of the elements come from famous personalities from the fields of politics, films, paintings, children’s literature, cartoon characters, as well as video games. This shows how fertile and potent memetic activity is, and how fast it can make its diverse copies.



Figure 35: ISIS Crappy Collage Grand prix memes (Twitter)

Similarly, Figures 35 and 36 show a myriad of photoshopped memes drawing their imagery from various symbols of modern culture, as, for instance, in Figure 35, Meme No. 3 uses the infamous botched up Jesus fresco *Ecce Homo*, which is in Spain, suggesting that this meme’s eventual wider popularity went beyond the original Japanese audience. *Botched Ecce Homo Painting*, which is also known as *Potato Jesus*, is a badly restored fresco of Jesus in an old Spanish church, and it became a topic for mockery and jokes, due to unprofessional work that led to strange imagery, which was nowhere near to the original. The image went viral, and the church that has this mishandled fresco has now emerged as a Spanish tourist attraction, due to all the media attention it grabbed. The meme replaces the bungled image with that of the ISIS militant which is seen in the *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix* screengrab. In Figure 36, Meme no. 4, the militant is seen taking the *Ice Bucket Challenge* – an online viral task that asked people to dump a basket of ice over themselves or over another person in order to raise awareness of a neurological disease, Motor Neurone Disease. In the meme, the militant is seen pouring a bucket full of ice over a hostage. Meme No. 5 uses a very popular meme, which is called *Godzilla Attack on Titan*, and which is based on a Japanese Manga series that was created by a Japanese author, Hajime Isayama. Godzilla, the very famous, fictional Japanese monster, who has a global appeal, is replaced with the picture of the militant in the meme.



Figure 36: ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix (Contd.)

The memes in Figure 37 show various iconic popular culture images that are used to mock ISIS. In Meme No. 2, the iconic shot “I am Flying” from the American film *Titanic*, with Rose and Jack standing on the railing of the ship, is photoshopped with the ISIS militant's image in place of Rose, in order to poke fun at them. In Meme No. 2, the famous illustration from the legendary children's book by Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, is used to ridicule ISIS by replacing the mother rabbit with the militant, and the text on the meme says “Bring out \$200,000,000” and Peter Rabbit replying “I'm sorry, I don't have any.”



Figure 37: ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix (Contd.)

#### D. Theme – Terrorism (*The Confession Bear memes*)

The *Confession Bear* Memes typically consist of a bear that is accompanied by text that talks about the taboos and stereotypes in society that the producer of the meme wishes to share with the audience. The original photo of the bear was submitted at Getty Images in 2007. A Reddit user used it for the first time in 2012, so as to use it as a background for his confessions online and that is why it is called the *Confession Bear* Meme. Figure 38 shows how this particular form of meme is used to highlight some everyday stereotypes in relation to Muslims and Islam. In Meme No.1, the caption says “*Lost my friend at the airport – can’t call loudly for him because his name is Jihad*” indicates the bias against the Arabic word ‘*Jihad*’, which is mentioned in Islamic literature, and which literally means to struggle. In popular parlance, ‘*Jihad*’ is associated with violence, especially the waging of a holy war against any force which threatens Islam or Muslims. The critics of Islam blame Islamic theology for promoting violence against non-Muslims in the name of *Jihad*. In fact, many notorious terrorist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, have misappropriated this term in order to justify their narrow goals and gruesome acts against innocent people, and therefore the word itself



has become almost a taboo. This meme, by saying that a person cannot call out his friend's name aloud at the airport, because it is *Jihad*, alludes to the possible reaction that the use of this word would evoke in a public place. There have been many instances since the 9/11 attacks, when people, following the complaints of fellow passengers, have been deboarded from airplanes or questioned for using everyday Arabic words, like *InshaAllah*, *Allahbhuakbar*, which are automatically seen as being a precursor to an Islamic terrorist attack. In Meme No. 2 the caption says: “*as a Muslim i believe that isis – are a bunch of fucking worthless brain dead scumfuck bastards, piles of trash, mental dickfaces that should be gunned down in the street like the degenerates they are.*” This meme must have been created by a Muslim who wants to express his/her disgust for the organisation by using the common swear words that are popularly used online. It has, perhaps, both the Muslim and non-Muslim audiences in mind. Meme No. 3's text says: – “*I think that terrorists – are poisonous to the Arab community*”. Both the memes attempt to counter a belief that is held by many: that Muslims are ISIS or terror sympathisers, and that Muslims indirectly endorse their acts, including those Muslim migrants who have settled in the Western world.



Figure 38: Confession Bear meme (Twitter)

E. Theme – Security and Surveillance (*FBI agent/Government agent watching me*)



Figure 39: FBI Agent Watching Me meme (Twitter)

*FBI Agent Watching Me* memes have become popular since 2017, thus signifying the increase in mass surveillance. This meme typically presents a meme maker who is acknowledging the fact that s/he is aware of being watched through a webcam by an agent from an intelligence agency. Interestingly, the person who is being watched does not mind it or is aware that he cannot do much about it, and often comes up with sympathetic thoughts for the imagined agents. This indicates the normalisation of the phenomenon of being watched in the name of national security, as Muslims are perceived to be vulnerable to radicalisation (Coppock, Guru and Stanley, 2018). In Figure 39, the meme says: “My appointed FBI agent discovering halalhumour” and shows an agent grinning while he is watching his surveilled subject indulge in *Halal Humour*. Broadly, *Halal Humour* is a digital cultural practice that is used by Muslims, who create and share jokes and memes on their everyday experiences against the backdrop of Islamophobic trends and the larger politics around Muslims and Islam internationally. The word ‘*Halal*’, which means permissible or in accordance with the will of God, is perhaps a pun on the clergymen who are often seen to be obsessed with the *Halal* and the *Haram*, and readily issue certificates on what is right and wrong,

tend to discourage humour in favour of a more serious-minded approach to life. The creative and political pursuit of *Halal Humour thus* defies the typecasting that puts the Muslim into narrow roles that are caused by forces from both within and without.

Meme 2, in Figure 39, is a tweet screenshot which was eventually turned into a meme in which a man with an Arabic name, Awab, is giving a goodnight kiss to ‘Mr. FBI Man’. This again displays the normalisation of an awareness of being watched. The tweet says: “\*kisses laptop webcam before bed\* goodnight mr fbi man”.



Figure 40: Distracted Boyfriend meme (Twitter)

Although, in general, surveillance has increased in society, the Muslim communities have experienced it more than others in the post 9/11 attacks' global order. The security agencies of various countries have been claiming that Muslims are becoming self-radicalised by using digital platforms online. The rise of ISIS, and of many from the Western world who are leaving to join them in Syria and Iraq, has only increased this practice of monitoring the digital footprints of Muslims in the name of national security and wellbeing (Alimohamed-Wilson, 2018). Often, when non-Muslims discover *Halal Humour*, surprise is their first reaction. The grin on the face of the FBI agent is akin to someone who has stumbled upon something pleasant quite unexpectedly.



Almost as if the agent were expecting his monitored subject to visit sites with gory images, and that have the material to incite violence and that, on the contrary, all that he could find is indulgence in benign and creative *Halal Humour*, and who eventually ends up enjoying the jokes. This meme conceivably wishes to convey the anti-climactic moment for the agent. The situation that these memes presented is dark, and yet it affords humorous possibilities.

Figure 40 shows a popular meme: *Distracted Boyfriend*, or *Man Looking at Other Woman*, which shows a man who is seemingly with his partner and who is distracted by another woman. This meme is believed to have originated from the Turkish blogosphere, and it is used as an object labelling meme, which means that the three characters in the meme are labelled as entities about whom the meme maker wishes to communicate. In this meme, the guy is labelled ‘FBI’, and his partner as ‘*A solid tip on a mass shooter*’, and the other woman as ‘Muslim Googling Anything’. The meme traverses issues of terrorism, surveillance, and security to the right to privacy. By showing that the FBI is distracted while monitoring the online activities of Muslims, fearing them to be a threat to national security when there are comparatively much more serious issues like the rise in the cases of mass shootings at public places in the United States, that need attention. The meme points to the disproportionate attention that has been given to the regular Muslim after the 9/11 attacks, so much so that it, more often than not, is in direct violation of their right to privacy (Alimohamed-Wilson, 2018; Nagra and Maurutto, 2016). The intelligence agencies are here being critiqued for their lack of quality monitoring of the potential threats to national security in their myriad forms, and not just of terrorism in the name of Islam. This meme has been created from the point of view of a Muslim, and it is addressed to a general audience.

#### 4.1.3. Thematic Analysis: Conclusion

This section has presented a glimpse at the internet memes on Islam and Muslims, and the possible meanings that they may hold, by thematically parsing them under two major themes, namely *Everyday Life and Lived Religion* and *Terrorism and Security*. Both themes were further divided into sub-themes, either based on the dominating form or on the content featured in the meme. The Everyday Life and Lived Religion internet memes, the majority of which came possibly from the Muslim meme makers, who are self-narrating their experiences of being a Muslim and practicing Islam (the *Ramadan* memes), negating the theological codes set by religious institutions ( e.g., the *Inshallah* and *Bismillah* memes), resisting and subverting the hate and racist narratives that are peddled by the ‘Others’ by employing humour (e.g., the *Hijab* and *Ordinary Muslim Man* memes), using ‘Trash Culture’ (Simon, 1999; Pye, 2011) and ‘coherent and contradictory plurality’ (de Certeau, 2011) as devices through which to subvert the digital propaganda of terrorist actors, like ISIS, who thrive, both within and without, in the name of Islam (*ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix*).

The Terrorism and Security theme, in which non-Muslims were significant actors in targeting and subverting the narratives on ‘Islam being a religion of peace’, and in highlighting the extremist elements amongst Muslims (*Condescending Wonka/Creepy Wonka* memes), which were set up in the context of the post-9/11 attacks on the USA, which also led to the legitimisation of surveillance and the securitisation of Muslims at the cost of their right to privacy. There was strong evidence of the normalisation of surveillance amongst Muslims, as well as the use of humour as a device that is employed for ‘relief’, and the fissures in otherwise constrained environments (Bakhtin, 1971; Monro, 2010) in *FBI Agent Watching Me* memes. The memes in both categories were actively used to counter Islamophobia, as well as to reclaim words that are used in Islamic theology (like *Jihad*, *Hijab*), which are widely used by Islamophobes to target Muslims.

Rich transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006, 2019) has also been a defining feature of most of the memes above, as the visual elements of the memes not only came from popular cultural products, like Hollywood classics (e.g., *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *Titanic* and *Spider Man*), Video games (e.g., *Flappy Bird*), Classical Literature (e.g., *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*), Popular American TV shows (e.g., *Friends* and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*), but also from user-created media, as in the case of the *Ordinary Muslim Man*, *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix*, *Inshallah* and *Bismillah* memes.

The popularity of these internet meme families has provided strong evidence of memetic characteristics, in terms of their spread and their diverse mutations, which support Dawkins’ (1976) propositions on the meme-gene analogy. Each of the meme families that is discussed above (*Ordinary Muslim Man*, *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix*, *Condescending Wonka/Creepy Wonka* and *Woman Yelling at a Cat*) have at the very least, hundreds of variants that exist in the memesphere. All of them show signs of a direct relationship between longevity and the success of an idea, which is also the basic premise of memetics’ theoretical framework (Dawkins, 1976). For example, the *Condescending Wonka/Creepy Wonka* memes’ visual schema come from a 1971 Hollywood classic film, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Similarly, the legendary children’s book from Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, was originally published in 1902 and is widely used in the memetic sphere, including being used in our analysed data set. These cultural ideas have survived for a substantial number of years, in the case of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* more than a century, and that have been reappropriated (mutated, in the memetic sense) by people in their myriad everyday contexts.

However, it is the success of the ordinary and everyday ‘procedure of creativity’ (de Certeau, 2011) that needs a special mention here. The fact that an everyday photograph of a regular Muslim man from Pakistan has resulted in an entire, and perhaps one of the most celebrated, meme families – *Ordinary Muslim Man* -whose spread and application is quite high, under the hashtags #HalalHumour

and *#MuslimMemes*, shows the real potential of the internet memes which may borrow from the legendary popular media but, however, they are not dependent on them. The memetic sphere has the capability to transform the regular and the ordinary into ‘popular culture’ by the sheer scale of mimicking the original message and creating its varied offspring (Dawkins, 1976) by collaborating with other successful and ordinary ideas.

The answer to the question with which this section started, i.e., what is the nature of the interaction among the various elements of the internet memes on Islam and Muslims? Well, the nature, as has been observed in the discussed memes is highly memetic and transmedial in terms of the form quickly adapting old ideas to new settings. And in terms of motivations and content, it is not just topical based on the popular ideas whose agenda is often set by the mainstream actors, but is also situated in the everyday and regular contexts of Muslims who are using it simply to share and express their everyday lived experience, as well as to subvert the dominant mainstream agenda by employing the ‘everyday’ as a tool of subversion in order to challenge the myths and stereotypes about them.

## 4.2. Network analysis of hashtag memes

This section will answer RQ1:

- *Research question 1 (RQ1):* If and how internet memes are subversive in the context of Islam and Muslims?

This chapter presents and explains the major findings from the networks generated from the selected *hashtag memes* gathered for the purpose of this work. In doing so it would contextualise and analyse these insights in the larger context of discourse on Muslims and Islam. The networks are based on the attributional and relational data collected from Twitter. It has identified major hashtags and key Twitter users who are driving the conversation, on Islam and Muslims, from the point of view of understanding their political and geographical context, as well as related memeplexes (co-occurring hashtags) (Dawkins, 1976) which have emerged around the primary hashtag memes. One might ask what we are really achieving by getting to know all this information. Someone pointed this out to the researcher, "... yes, you know all this but what do you do with it, what value does it add?" This is exactly what would be demonstrated in the analysis. In this sense individual-ordinary users are not so important to this analysis (in fact, the researcher is acutely aware that doing it beyond a point, leads this work towards being surveillant as well as individualistic) therefore except institutional-individual users no private-individual users have been identified here; instead it is the patterns which are emerging out of the interaction of thousands of users and corresponding hashtags that is of essence in terms of understanding forms and patterns in digital discursive practices. Therefore, this analysis will highlight 'ways of operating' (de Certeau, 2011), mimicking and mutating, (Dawkins, 1976; Marsden, 1998; Blackmore, 1999; Pentland, 2010), spreading (Jenkins, 2009) activity in the memetic sphere.

Although all the data that has been used in this analysis exists in the public domain, the individual users' profile details have not been revealed in the analysis as this might have consequences for them. However, the details of individuals who have a verified account indicated by a Blue Badge (conferred by Twitter) have been divulged as they either are representing institutions, or they are perceived as digital influencers (based on collected data and contextual evidence) and therefore their actions (Tweets) have notable consequences. According to Twitter, the accounts which have been verified through the Blue Badge, are accounts which have successfully demonstrated that they are authentic, notable, and active. A separate data file maintained by this researcher contains

details of all coded users and their respective Tweets which have been examined for this work and is being separately submitted alongside this document in order to ensure the reliability and authenticity of the research.

As mentioned in earlier sections, hashtags containing keywords related to Islam and Muslims are the primary unit of network analysis in this research. The specific class of hashtags selected for this study has been referred to as *hashtags memes*. This nomenclature encapsulates envisioning hashtags as memes in the sense that hashtags communicate ideas as well as become instruments of their subversion.

To answer RQ1, the researcher has adopted a network analysis approach to study the patterns of interactions among Twitter users who create and share the hashtag memes identified for this research. Twitter has several instruments of interaction – for example features that enable a reply, retweet, like and comment – to share ideas and information. Network analysis has been used to utilise these interactional data to analyse the patterns of information flow within the emerged communities inside the network. The networks generated from meme hashtags' data have been used to understand the memetic activity in relation to the larger context of hashtags and users and derive patterns of subversion in discourse on various aspects of Islam and Muslims.

In context of the present research, the selection of Twitter as a site of memetic activity is ideal as it allows individual users to interact in a more engaged and self-driven way. Twitter has become a platform by which opinion building instruments like 'hashtag activism' have been exercised by some parts of society which can afford this technology and has played a vital role in current social events and processes (for example, its role during the Arab Spring) as most decision makers are also part of this platform. This analysis has revealed a hidden dynamics in the memetic sphere which has enabled this research to address questions on key public opinion leaders whose Tweets were critical in shaping the digital discourse on Islam and Muslims; the nature and spread of discursive practices and if they are influenced by factors such as number of followers, retweets or by placemat of certain node in the network which ensures end-to-end connectivity of all interacting nodes, the importance of events and their geographical context.

The hashtags earlier listed in Table 2 are meme hashtags. They have originated in response to some event or established authoritative framework and practices. They are popular and have been widely

circulated, reused and modified in different contexts in relation to ideas and practices related to Islam and Muslims.

While the primary set of three hashtag memes which have been selected, i.e., #ISIS, #Halal, #Hijab in this analysis are established and dominating memes in the digital discourse on Islam and Muslims. They are either dominant religious ideas having roots in Islamic theology (Halal and Haram) or a major international phenomenon entailing some Muslims (ISIS). This analysis then looks at the corresponding subversion hashtags for these three primary hashtag memes and engenders an analysis based on how the primary hashtags have mutated and their longevity. This analysis has found that most of the subversive meme hashtags originated from instances like an individual's – reaction, response or comment on events of importance. For example, #YouAintNoMuslimBruv hashtag came into existence after a man tried to stab a bystander while shouting *Allah hu Akbar* in the London Underground in 2015. Another man who was present at the site riposted to the knifeman 'You Aint No Muslim Bruv' in an attempt to delegitimise the attacker's claim to be a Muslim as the assaulter's initiation into the act was by reciting *Allah hu Akbar*. As soon as this incident was reported in the media, people started using this hashtag to express their disapproval of the criminal acts committed by terror organizations under the garb of religion (Booth, 2015; Aly, 2015) and in the process subverting the possible original intent of the attacker to legitimise the attack in the name of Islam.

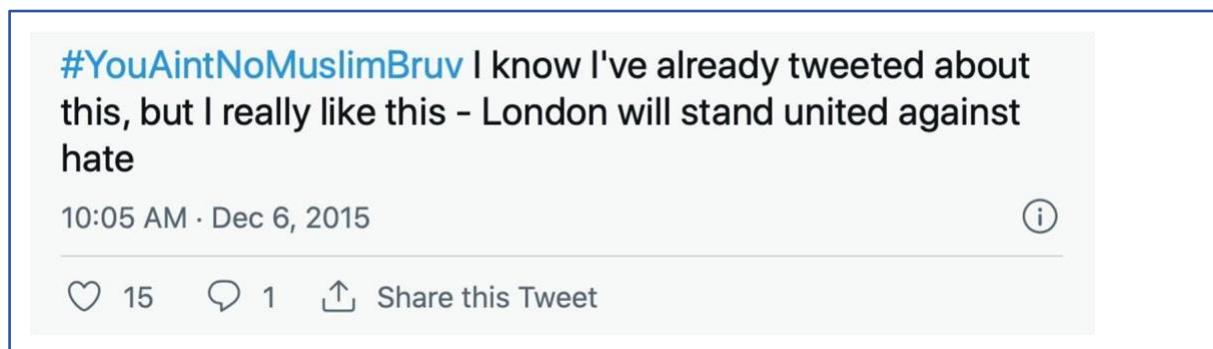


Figure 41: Tweet example of #YouAintNoMuslimBruv

Figure 41 is an example of one of the Tweets using #YouAintNoMuslimBruv from a user, when the attack happened in December 2015. Although, this hashtag started in December 2015, it continues to be used till date carrying messages with its original intent of disassociating Muslims from terror attacks carried out in the name of Islam, as well as being used in entirely different contexts, for example, when a group of people were found shouting antisemitic slurs after one of the Israeli offensives against Gaza in which 139 Palestinians including 39 children were killed (Parveen, 2021), Twitterati used #youaintnomuslimbruv to denounce people who projected themselves as Muslims while undertaking this act. The following tweet (Figure 42) shows that this

hashtag has been shared as recently as in May 2021, this shows the longevity of a meme and how it is exploited by users to further their own communication agendas using successful hashtag memes.

Figure 42: Longevity of meme



Figure 42 shows an example of longevity and dynamisms of *#youaintnomuslimbruv* which started in 2015 and is found to be used in 2021 by people in entirely different contexts.

However, contrary to the above examples, the following tweet (Figure 43) completely subverts *#youaintnomuslimbruv* hashtag's original intent of delinking Muslims from terrorist attack which are carried in the name of Islam and instead questions the logic of this delinking by highlighting the inconsistency in approach by arguing that when a police personnel is a perpetrator the entire police force is held accountable but the same logic is not extended in case of Muslims involved in terrorist attacks.



Figure 43: Example of subversion of *#youaintnomuslimbruv*

Similarly, hashtag *#ISISCrappyCollageGrandPrix* started when two Japanese citizens were taken hostage by ISIS in 2015. ISIS released a video of the two hostages with an ISIS recruit in the background to instil terror in order to effectuate their demand for ransom. While the original intent of the video was to strike terror, the Japanese users creatively subverted the intent by using *#ISISCrappyCollageGrandPrix* hashtag. In response to this event, Twitter users from Japan began posting parody images made from the original video snapshot mocking ISIS. One of the earliest posts can be traced back to a Japanese Twitter user which got retweeted 7,700 times and got over 5,000 favourites within first 7 hours (KnowYourMeme, 2015).

As is evident from the above examples, once a hashtag is circulated to enough individuals and gets attention, people start adding their own ideas to it that may be playful and thought-provoking. Hence, a meme hashtag by virtue of its inherent attributes like shared engagement, modification, and reutilization are perfect vessels to disseminate ideas. The spread of meme hashtags depends upon several factors which are also examined in this chapter. Simply put, this chapter argues, in light of the collected evidence, the importance of events, geography, and discursive practices and their role as the intervening phenomenological variables that give the hashtags/networks their liveness, discursivity and meaning. The main agenda of this chapter is engendering data analysis using network analysis.

#### 4.2.1. Types of networks

The Networks in this study have been generated from the data collected using hashtag memes to understand the patterns of subversion of ideas and concepts related to Islam and Muslims. A tweet is an information powerhouse. Users interacting on Twitter using functions like ‘mentions’, ‘retweets’, ‘follow’, ‘like’, create a rich set of relationships which can be effectively captured using networks. Several networks have been designed and constructed using the collected data keeping in mind the objectives of this research.

Type of networks discussed in the following section:

1. Actor Networks : Twitter users’ networks are generated in order to detect communities based on selected meme topics and identify key players who are driving the conversation.
2. Hashtag networks : this category of network is formed using the selected primary hashtag memes, and related frequently used co-occurring hashtags.



3. Furthermore, the location data provided in the Twitter users' profile have been used to see the geographic clustering of different hashtags and topics.

The steps involved in generating different network types are listed below:

- I. Tweets were extracted from Twitter API containing the meme hashtags from Table 2 and 3. Search query was executed for each of the hashtags and fetched data was stored as Comma Separated Value (CSV) files.
- II. Extracted Tweets were parsed, and a series of steps were applied to get clean data. Stop words, punctuations, web addresses, accents, special symbols, emojis and emoticons were dropped from the Tweet text. Tweet text was converted into lowercase and frequency for each word was calculated. A word having frequency greater than three is included in the analysis and forms the node in the network. The edge table for networks contains the relationship between two words.
- III. Using the processed data, the network was generated using an open-source software called *Gephi*. Network metrics like degree, centrality, modularity, eccentricity, and eigenvector centrality were computed for the given network. The graph layout was constructed according to the nature of the analysed network using *Force Atlas 2* and other related algorithms available in *Gephi*.

Results of network analysis have been organized in four sections:

- A. Analysis of networks generated from Pool A meme hashtags (the primary hashtags)
- B. Analysis of networks generated from Pool B meme hashtags (hashtags specifically selected to examine subversive communication)
- C. Comparative analysis of Pool A and Pool B hashtags
- D. Geographic analysis of hashtags in pool A and Pool B.

List of networks created to understand the digital memetic activity of three dominant ideas (ISIS, Halal and Hijab) selected from Pool A hashtags:

*Table 11: Network formed from pool A*

Network 1	#ISIS Actor Network to study the key players in spreading #ISIS hashtag meme
Network 2	#ISIS Co-occurring Hashtag Network to study the key topics related to #ISIS
Network 3	#Halal Actor Network to study the key players in spreading #Halal hashtag meme
Network 4	#Halal Co-occurring Hashtag Network to study the key topics related to #Halal
Network 5	#Hijab Co-occurring Hashtag Network to study the key topics related to #Hijab

List of Networks created to understand the subversive digital memetic activity with respect to the three selected dominant ideas (ISIS, Halal and Hijab) selected from Pool B hashtags:

*Table 12: Networks formed from pool B*

Network 6	#OpParis Actor Network to study the key players in #ISIS's subversion
Network 7	#OpParis Hashtag Network to study the nature of #ISIS's subversion
Network 8	#TraditionallySubmissive Actor Network to study the key players in #Hijab's subversion
Network 9	#TraditionallySubmissive Hashtag Network to study the nature of #Hijab's subversion
Network 10	#HalalHumour Actor Network to examine the key players in #Halal's subversion
Network 11	#HalalHumour Hashtag Network to examine the nature of #Halal's subversion

#### **4.2.1.1. Network analysis of pool A primary hashtags**

The result and analysis presented in this section are based on hashtag memes listed in pool A out of which three dominant ideas in circulation with respect to Islam and Muslims namely ISIS, Hijab and Halal, have been selected. The selection of these three ideas have been based on first few rounds of pilot data collection on Twitter using key words Islam and Muslims. Although, ISIS, Hijab and Halal form three core ideas related to digital discourse on Islam and Muslims; there are number of other ideas (hashtag memes) which attach themselves with these dominant threads and therefore are an integral part of the engendered networks.

In order to understand, the nature of the data collected, following is the sample of data information that has been extracted from the Twitter API for #Hadith – one of the co-occurring hashtags on Islam and Muslims.

```

{
  "url":"https://twitter.com/Mohammadfahim68/status/1432269495041
671170", "date":"2021-08-30T09:10:32+00:00",
  "content":"#Hadith \n#HadithOfTheDay \n\n#ProphetMuhammad ( PBUH ) said :\n\n #Fatima is a part of me, and he who makes
her angry, makes me #angry . \n\nSahih al Bukhari 3714 Book 62, Hadith 64\n\n#Allah\n#Islam\n#Muslim",
  "renderedContent":"#Hadith \n#HadithOfTheDay \n\n#ProphetMuhammad ( PBUH ) said :\n\n #Fatima is a part of me, and he who
makes her angry, makes me #angry . \n\nSahih al Bukhari 3714 Book 62, Hadith 64\n\n#Allah\n#Islam\n#Muslim",
  "id":1432269495041671170,
  "user":{
    "_type":"modules.twitter.User",
    "username":"Mohammadfahim6
8", "id":3067395447,
    "displayName":"MOHAMMAD FAHIM",
    "description":"\u0627\u0644\u0644\u0647\u0645 \u0627\u062c\u0631\u0627\u062c\u0645\u0646 \u0627\u0644\u0646\u0644\u0647\u0645 \u0644\u0627 \u0646\u0647\u0644 (\n#Hell-Fire )", "rawDescription":"\u0627\u0644\u0644\u0647\u0645 \u0627\u062c\u0631\u0627\u062c\u0645\u0646 \u0627\u0644\u0646\u0644\u0647\u0645 \u0644\u0627 \u0646\u0647\u0644 (\n#Hell-Fire )", "descriptionUrls":null,
    "verified":false,
    "created":"2015-03-03T08:34:33+00:00",
    "followersCount":
12, "friendsCount":1,
    "statusesCount":17362,
    "favouritesCount":0,
    "listedCount":0,
    "mediaCount":654,
    "location":"Jakarta,
Indonesia",
    "protected":false,
    "linkUrl":null,
    "linkTcourl":null,
    "profileImageUrl":"https://pbs.twimg.com/profile_images/1432707787054895111/MqCv8Dbu_normal.jpg",
    "profileBannerUrl":"https://pbs.twimg.com/profile_banners/3067395447/1630406527",
    "url":"https://twitter.com/Mohammadfahim68"
  },
  "replyCount":0,
  "reTweetCount":0,
  "likeCount":0,
  "quoteCount":0,
  "conversationId":1432269495041671170,
  "lang":"en",
  "source":"<a href=\"https://botbird.net\" rel=\"nofollow\">Botbird Tweets</a>",
  "sourceUrl":"https://botbird.net",
  "sourceLabel":"Botbird
Tweets", "outlinks":null,
  "tcooutlinks":null,
  "media":null,
  "retweetedTweet":null,
  "quotedTweet":null,
  "inReplyToTweetId":nu
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  "mentionedUsers":null,
  "coordinates":null,
  "place":null,
  "hashtags":[
"Hadith",
"HadithOfTheDay",
"ProphetMuhammad",
"Fatima",
"angry",
"Allah",
"
Islam
",
"Musl
im"
],
  "cashtags":null
}

```

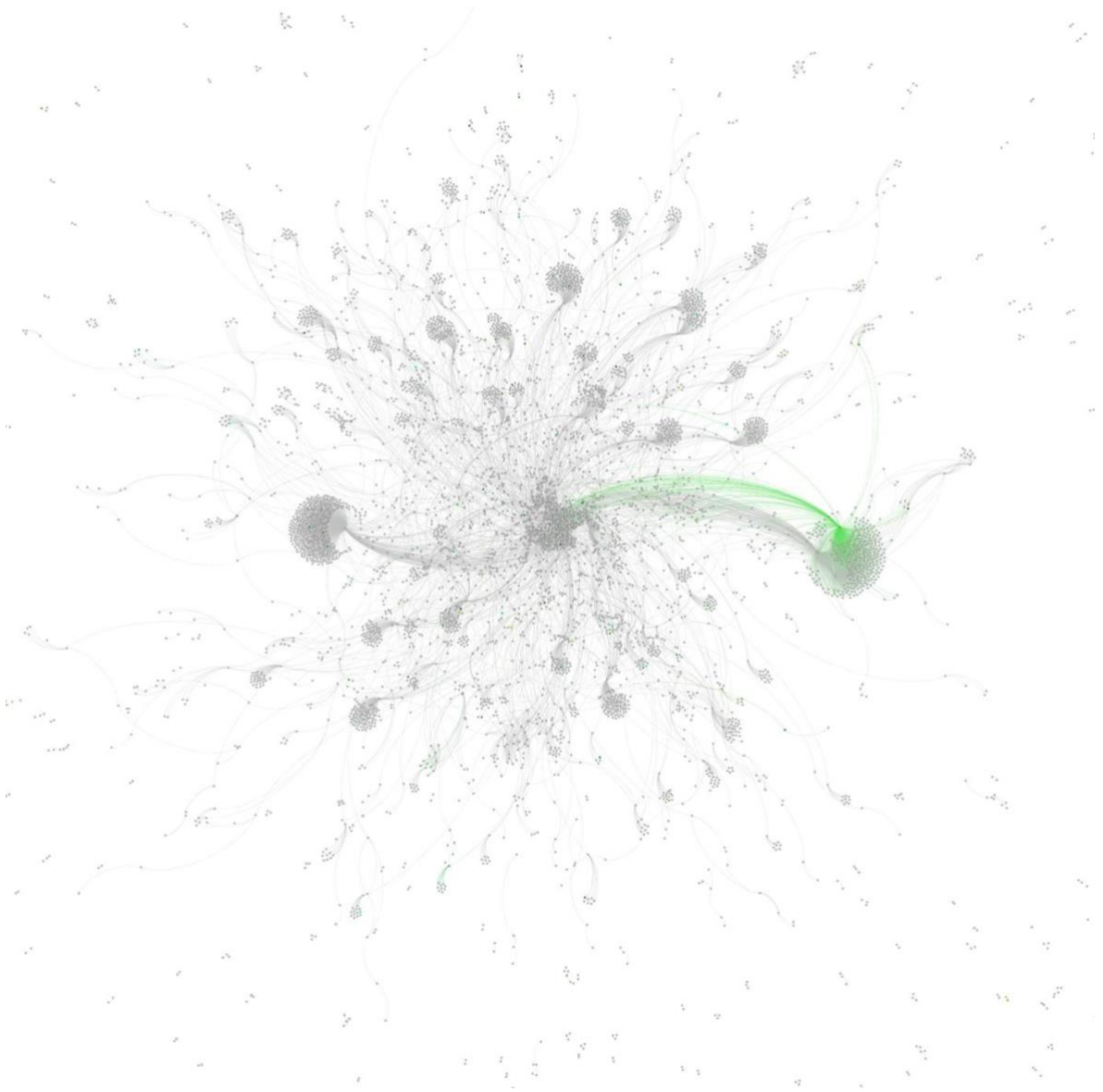
One can see in the box above, various data fields (some highlighted in red) – like the ‘friendCount’, ‘followerCount’, hashtags, location, ‘retweetCount’, ‘likeCount’ as well as the content of the Tweet - which have been used in creation of different network types. The first few networks described below represent the interaction patterns of users, hashtags and evolution of communities based on commonly shared and engaged hashtag memes by means of reply, retweets, likes, and mention.

### **A. Network 1: #ISIS Actor Network**

The first two networks highlight the discursive practices specifically on ISIS and relating to ISIS which are attaching themselves to a vessel #ISIS. It is also foregrounding its circulation patterns and major actors involved in the memetic activity. One might assume that #ISIS would only carry ideas on the so-called Islamic State or the larger politics surrounding it. However, the following findings show that at times, ideas that have nothing to do with ISIS or even Islam or Muslims also use the potency of #ISIS to project itself.

The layout method for generating the network follows a basic rule: linked nodes (connected by means of a Twitter activity in the form of reply, retweet, etc.) attract each other, and non-linked nodes repel each other. The dense cluster of nodes that we see together, in the following network, are the Twitter users who have produced and engaged with each other's content on ISIS while the ones who are distant do not engage with the same hashtag memes. The intensity of attraction and repulsion is controlled using the count of replies, likes, mentions, or retweets.

Following is the Actor network depicting interaction among Twitter users retweeting or mentioning #ISIS (Figure 44)



*Figure 44: #ISIS Actor Network*

Several insights can be inferred from Figure 44. The communities which are formed can be visually identified. Even without referring to any statistical measures (like eigenvector centrality and clustering coefficient), using only our naked eye, we can see that the users are forming hubs around some nodes in the network. However, there are very few key nodes (mentioned in Table 13) with dense clustering which are forming hubs (big and small). These key links or users are crucial in driving and extending the conversation around various tropes on ISIS in these specific communities. Using Network theory parlance, we can say these critical nodes have high centrality measure and their visual density suggest that they have high clustering coefficient as well. The fact that there are roughly 7 critical hubs (Table XXX) in this dense network of 5500 show that this network is showing ‘preferential attachment’ which concerns itself with alignment of most nodes around very few nodes in a network (see, Borgatti et. al, 2009; Barabasi, 2012, 2016). Albert-Laszlo Barabasi’s work on networks provides rich evidence of ‘preferential attachment’ of

nodes in networks. Preferential attachment of nodes means that in a given network few nodes always emerge as leaders so much so that the entire network's dynamics is dependent on them and therefore one can deduce that a network, if showing preferential attachment, is not a random network where all the nodes enjoy equal probability of being influential. This observation can also contribute to the debate on whether all internet users or most users are equal and have an equal opportunity to go viral. Given the fact that very few hubs have emerged in the above network shows that it would only take a few key nodes to change the entire conversation around a subject or at least set the agenda for what is being discussed.

This simply, however, does not mean that the users with high followers are automatically the ones which are critical in the network because that way we don't need a network to reveal which nodes are crucial one can simply look at the number of followers and assess. The network shows that nodes with as less as two followers (for example, @AnonymisedUser3) (see Table 13) can also be critical. This insight, that a user with as little as two followers can also be a critical stakeholder in a conversation, can only be achieved through a network analysis. Moreover, this example of a node with two followers also demonstrates how useful it is to find out the positioning of users in a given network as this has been observed as playing a crucial role in nodes' character. Viewed in this way, this approach gives us an indication of the nature of actors in terms of their attributional and relational data. This finding also depicts how a non-significant node in a Twitter conversation results in crucial group formation.

The topology of the network shows scattered groups – both small and large – connected by few key nodes. Existence of multiple topics (represented by hubs) can be clearly deduced from the structure of the network. Each hub represents a set of unique topics on ISIS. These topics are mediated by key actors listed in Table 13.

### **Introducing the actors**

The following table is introducing some of the major actors who the network shows are defining and shaping the discourse on ISIS using #ISIS.

Table 13: Critical nodes in #ISIS Actor network

Twitter Handle	Verified by Twitter	Following Count	Followers Count	Account's Self-Description	Likely location	Notable Feature
@siasatpk (its related hub is indicated by Red)	Yes	1	1.4 M	Pakistan's biggest digital media platform – Discussion forum & News blogs	Pakistan	Propagates ISIS as a conspiracy against Muslims by Israel, the West and India  Hugely popular with Urdu speaking population of Pakistan, India and the Global North.
@TarekFatah (its related hub is indicated by green colour)	Yes	2346	733.8K	An Indian born in Pakistan. Canadian by choice. Columnist, Toronto Sun. Author, "Tragic Illusion of an Islamic State." A Marxist fighting Islamism for 50 years.	Canada	Critic of Political Islam and extremism amongst Muslims Perceived as anti-Pakistan A controversial figure in the Indian subcontinent
@CtrlSec (its related hub is indicated by brown colour)	No	20.9K	24.8K	Our mission is to limit and destroy online extremism in all shapes. To participate in the cause please report the targets sent from our accounts.	France	Digital activism against ISIS's Twitter accounts  Enjoys followers across the world especially in the Global North
@AnonymisedUser1 (its related hub is indicated by blue colour)	No	383	42	No description available	India	Right-wing handle
@AnonymisedUser2 (its related hub is indicated by violet colour)	No	1674	1216	#teamthierry#hollandfortrumember ON! member fvd!http://Jensen.nl never never not a gene therapy	Netherlands	Right-wing Handle Anti-immigrants especially

				poison syringe #rugrecht #covidhoax!		relation to Dutch Muslim citizens who left to fight in Syria
@AnonymisedUse r3	No	29	2	forgiveness of God	Arabian Peninsula	Mainly Tweets in Arabic
@AnonymisedUse r4	No	602	231	Hate politics. love, peace, prayers for all. Retweets are not endorsements.	Pakistan	Only Tweets in Urdu

**@TarekFatah** is a Twitter verified account (indicted by a Blue Badge) which belongs to the Toronto Sun (an English-language tabloid newspaper) columnist – Tarek Fatah, based in Canada (he has roots in the Indian subcontinent), who primarily comments on subjects related to Islam and Muslims. He is celebrated by some (especially some Indians as his stance is often seen as ‘pro-India’ and ‘anti-Pakistan’) and loathed by others (especially many Pakistanis). He describes himself as, “An Indian born in Pakistan. Canadian by choice. Columnist, Toronto Sun. Author, "Tragic Illusion of an Islamic State." A Marxist fighting Islamism for 50 years.” Here are few examples of his Tweets using *#ISIS* which throws more light at the nature of this account and discursivity practiced by this handle. Figure 45 is an example of a typical Tweet by Tarek Fatah targeting the propounders of Islamophobia while highlighting the terrorist attack by ISIS.



Figure 45: A typical tweet by Tarek Fatah

The above Tweet got 179 retweets and 493 like. The green circle area in Figure 44 represents the cluster formed in the process of – sharing, commenting, liking, or challenging – activity generated around the above Tweet. Through the qualitative manual survey of the linked Tweets, it was found that many users retweeted and used *#ISIS* in combination with *#Islamophobia*, *#US*, *#India* etc. hashtags. Through this evidence it can be clearly observed that the users not only mimicked and amplified the original Tweet by sharing it further they also reused the principal argument made in



the Tweet in their own local context.

Tarek Fatah's Tweets confirm to a pattern which often target Pakistan's politics, extremism in Muslim societies, Muslim practices like Hijab, Jihad, and extremist activities amongst Muslim immigrants in the West. Hashtags which are widely used on his timeline are *#IslamicExtremism*, *#Islamicterrorism*, *#Islamophobia*, *#isiscrimes*, *#Hijab* and *#Niqab*. For example, in Figure 46A, he critiques the Pakistani PM's argument that 'Islam has nothing to do with terrorism' by citing early Islamic history where the three caliphs out of four (called *Rashidun* in Arabic) were killed by fellow rival Muslim groups. Many including Tarik Fateh believe that this was the beginning of Political Islam whose only motive was to capture power in the guise of spreading the message of Allah.

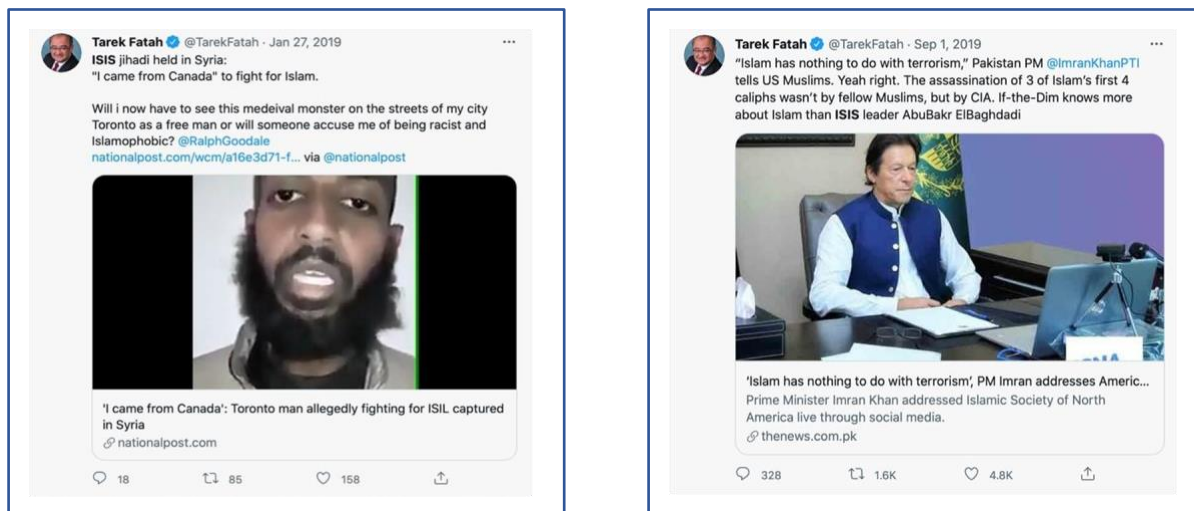


Figure 46: Digital discourse peddled by Tarek Fatah (A & B)

Similarly, in Figure 46B he questions the increasing demand by some people to repatriate the captured ISIS Western recruits from Syrian prison-camps. Tarek Fatah is often labelled as racist and Islamophobic for opposing their repatriation. By the same token, the Tweet depicted by the following Figure 47 derides Canadians recruited as 'ISIS wives' and call them 'halal sex cult' and 'Niqabi AK47 killers'. A Popular Islamic idea according to which a true believer will get 72 virgins in *Jannat* is also used to mock them.



Figure 47: Tweets peddling anti-Muslim women discourse

He also often shares stories from Washington-based Memri TV whose stated motive is to translate Middle East Arabic and Persian content to English language. This is important given the fact that Memri TV has gained notoriety for selecting the worst programmes which reinforces negative stereotypes about Muslims or further Israel's agenda (Whittaker, 2002) while at the same time there are people who see Memri TV as a significant partner in 'anti-terrorism information war' (Dasgupta, 2006). The channel is often called-out and mocked for inaccurate and absurd translations of the content in Arabian and Persian originating from the Arabian Peninsula.

**@siasatpk** is a Pakistan based verified account by Twitter (indicated by a Blue Badge) connected with the media organisation with the same name, which defines itself as Pakistan's biggest digital media platform. This handle has 1.4 M followers and Tweets mainly in Urdu especially after 2017. Now this is important as Urdu is mainly spoken and used in Pakistan and some parts of India

(Britannica, 2021). While Urdu is widely spoken and understood in India, the reading and writing proficiency of the language is extremely limited amongst Indian population given the fact that since partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947, it has been identified by many not only as language of Muslims but also as language of ‘separatism’ (Ahmad, 2011). Moreover, the fact that Urdu uses Perso-Arabic script makes it in view of some more identifiable with Islam and Muslims especially in comparison to Hindi, which is a mutually intelligible language to Urdu, but uses Devanagari script which originally belongs to Sanskrit language (identified with Hindus) (Ahmed, 2011). In this context, Urdu enjoys little state support barring in few regions of India. However, the Indian Muslim population, roughly 85% of which are *Pasmanda* Muslims (so-called lower castes Muslims as opposed to *Ashraf* or upper-caste Muslims like the Syeds) who are poor and backward (Ansari, 2019) rely on madrassas which are Muslim institutions primarily imparting theological education; are proficient in reading and writing in Urdu (Ahmad, 2002) besides few others. This is not to claim that only *Pasmanda* Muslims are proficient in Urdu but to provide the context of primarily who might be possibly reading the Urdu posts in India. Thus, the population which is engaging with this handle, which primarily Tweets in Urdu, is mainly Muslim population because the majority in Pakistan are Muslims and mainly Muslims can only read Urdu in India. Following is the geographical distribution of Siasat PK’s followers (Figure 48).

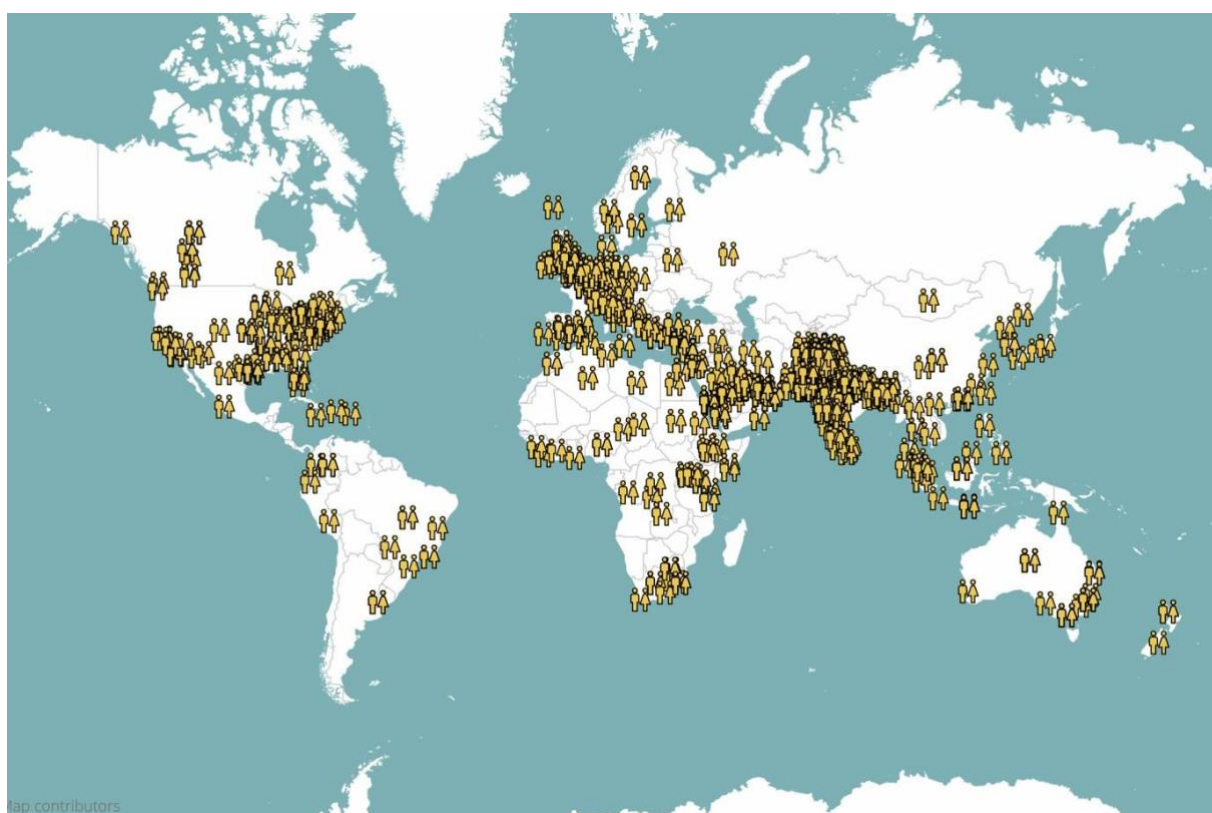


Figure 48: Geographic distribution of 5700 followers of @siasatpk

Link to interactive web map:  
<https://localfocuswidgets.net/614730f7e1685>

The geographical distribution mapped in Figure 48 of its users which are following this handle shows that they are coming mainly from Pakistan, some parts of India and a substantial number of followers are in the Middle East, Europe, parts of United States, Africa amongst other parts. It would be safe to say that these must be people who are either immigrants or expats from South Asia because they are the only ones whose proficiency in Urdu would be such that they can access the information using this channel. A qualitative search through the timeline of @siayast.pk throws light on the more nuanced aspects of the use of #ISIS by this account and its followers. This hashtag, on this handle, has been mainly used with #ISISisNotIslam. This account's narrative consistently links ISIS as being created by countries like the Israel, USA, France (sometimes simply clubbed as 'the West' by the followers of @siasatpk) and India; in order to defame Islam and Muslims. Its followers' replies also mimic the same pattern. Its followers widely interact in the comment section on the timeline, by arguing that if ISIS recruits are true Muslim as they claim then why are they not fighting against Israel, India, Lebanon and Palestine, a trope that is aggressively promoted by this handle. Siasat PK builds a narrative that ISIS is a conspiracy of these very countries against Islam and Muslims. For example, the following sample Tweet from Siasat.pk shows Netanyahu, the then president of Israel uncovering his mask underneath which hides the 'real ISIS' according to them (Figure 49). The survey of the timeline of this handle provides rich evidence of activity towards 'revealing' conspiracy against Muslims.



Figure 49: A tweet by @siasatpk



CtrlSec (@CtrlSec) a Twitter account started in February 2015, right after the terrorists entered the Charlie Hebdo's office following the drawings of Muhammad -the prophet of Islam and other related attacks in the month of January 2015, the year when French Charlie Hebdo cases happened; describes itself as an account committed to destroy online extremism. It simply shares accounts related to ISIS to its followers and asks them to 'report' it to Twitter in order to get them suspended from Twitter. Its account is linked to a website called reportonlineterrorism.com and the tagline on the website says, "so that you can take part in the war on terrorism". Looking at this account's timeline and its profile it is clear that it uses #ISIS to subvert the influence and online activities of ISIS. Other hashtags which are often used with this hashtag are #opiceisis, #iceisis, #target. The hashtags propagated by this handle see a very high mimetic activity.



Figure 50: Geographic distribution of followers of @CtrlSec

Link to interactive web map:  
<https://localfocuswidgets.net/6147855529f3d>

The geographical distribution map of CtrlSec's Twitter followers shows that people who engage with CtrlSec are coming from all over the world, however, they are especially concentrated in the south-east of USA, Europe, UK, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, parts of west Africa which in the recent past have seen the increased activity by organisations like ISWAP and Boko Haram. Parts that stand-out in terms of not showing any or negligible activity around this handle are Russia, and China.

@AnonymisedUser1 has only been opened in July 2021 and is a handle which mainly Tweets on Indian issues. Most of the followers of this handle, which are 41 in number, seem to be Indians by their profiles and timelines.

@AnonymisedUser2 is a Netherlands based handle. Most of the Tweets on its profile were in Dutch. Its profile description uses hashtags like #hollandfortrump, #covidhoax; clearly indicating that this handle supports Trump and promotes anti vaccine campaigns. This makes it amply clear that this user is endorsing right wing politics.

@AnonymisedUser3 is a unique user who has only two users and is still very significant in the network. Amongst its two followers one describes itself as a former FBI agent (all Tweets and bio in Arabic) and the second is based in Kuwait. Most of the evidence on this account indicates that this account is operated from the Arabian Peninsula most probably Kuwait.

@AnonymisedUser4 followers and it is very likely, going by this handle's timeline, that this user is based in Pakistan (probably in Karachi based on photos originating from this handle, shared on the timeline) because all the Tweets related to this handle are linked to Pakistan and mostly in Urdu. This handle also shares Tweets from Siasat PK. The Global North's narrative on terrorism is constantly challenged through this handle.

The user network is showing three major hubs right in the middle, concentrated around three major actors – Siasat PK, Tarek Fatah and CtrlSec. All of these users are unique ideologically and geographically – Siasat PK is based in Pakistan and championing conspiracies theories on ISIS, Tarek Fatah is based in Canada, challenging Political Islam and extremism from within the community, CtrlSec a France based handle which is digitally invading ISIS – and yet they all have common strands. Siasat.pk is right at the centre of this network connected with both CtrlSec and Tarek Fatah. Now, very broadly, this could mean two things: one that the users of Siasat PK which, as have been discussed above are primarily the Urdu-reading population (mainly Muslims), are targeting ISIS by reporting it to Twitter for suspension using information provided by CtrlSec's posts. However, Tarek Fatah and Siasat PK are ideologically antithetical to each other as Siasat PK constructs a narrative which denounces the very idea that ISIS can have anything to do with Islam whereas Tarek Fatah argues that Islam as has been interpreted by people right after the death of the Prophet starting from the first Caliph Abu-Bakar is the root cause of ideologies which engender

organisations like ISIS and Taliban. The connections between the disparate actors demonstrates contestation of competing narratives by invading each other's digital spaces.

### Network 2: Co-occurring Hashtag Network of #ISIS

The second network generated from #ISIS is network of co-occurring hashtags to investigate the major topic-based-communities emanating from the #ISIS. Figure 50 shows the hashtag network. The network has been formed with 5986 hashtags (number of nodes) and 22737 connections (number of edges).

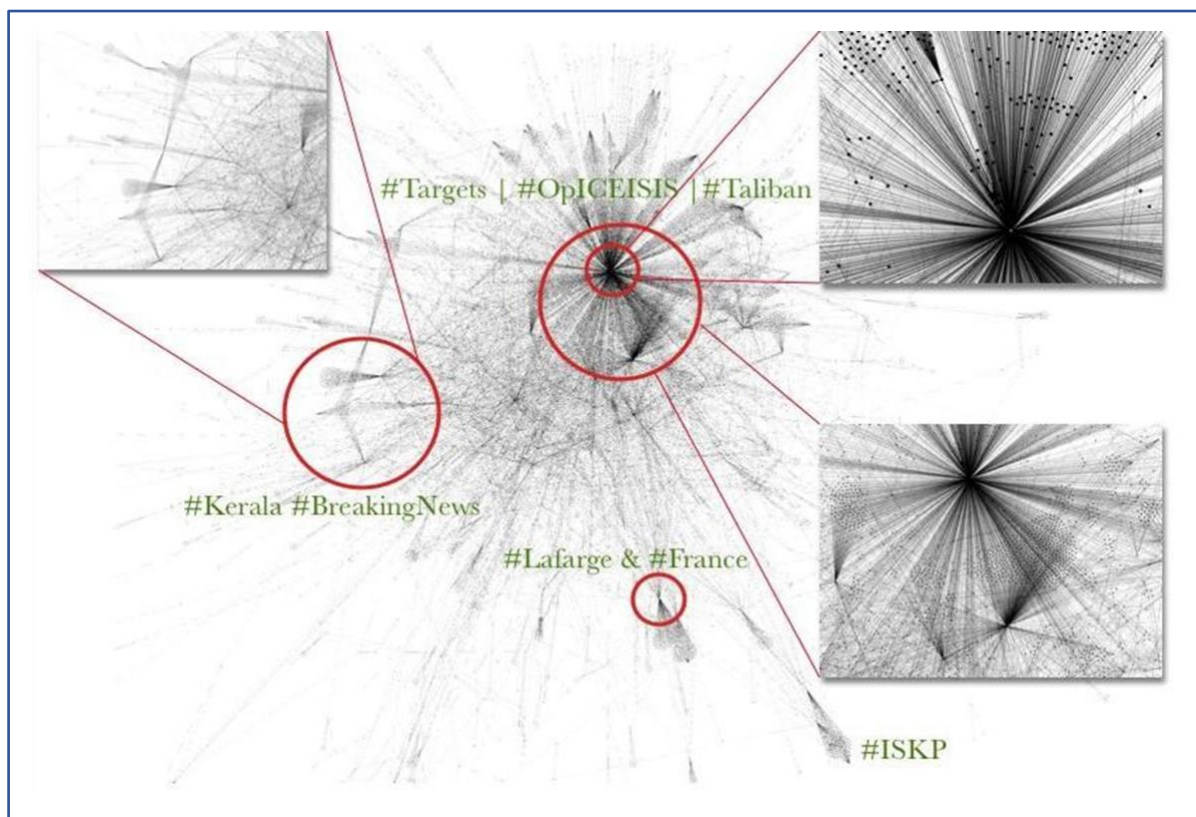


Figure 51: Hashtag network of #ISIS

Following are the major hashtags shared by key users in combination with #ISIS. @Ctrlsec which is one of the critical users in the first actor network is also figuring prominently in this network (Table 14 and Table 15). The majority of the prominent handles are Pakistani users.

## Introducing the key co-occurring hashtags:

Table 14: Top 20 co-occurring hashtags

Top 20 hashtags shared with #ISIS	<p>#Taliban #Lafarge #Kabul #TPLF #France #Turkey          #AlQaeda #Afghanistan #Iraq #Syria #ISWAP #Islam          #landverraders #French #jihad #BREAKING #ISIS #US          #terrorist #iceisis</p>
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Table 15: Critical co-occurring hashtags of #ISIS

Key Co-occurring hashtag	Origin	Constructed/reinforced ideas using the hashtag	Subverted ideas using the hashtag	Spread	Communities involved
#iceisis	Terrorist attacks in France since Charlie Hebdo episode in 2015	Community-based collective action against online propaganda machinery of ISIS	1. The so-called Islamic state. 2. ISIS is fighting for the just cause against the infidels.	Global especially the Global North	Anonymous hacktivist groups, ordinary Twitter users
#Lafarge	French Cement company's payment to ISIS in Syria	1. West funds terrorism 2. The hypocrisy of the West 3. ISIS is a conspiracy by the West and Israel against Muslims	1. The West is the propounder of human rights. 2. ISIS's roots lie in Islam and Islamic theology.	Global especially the Global South	ISIS, Lafarge -cement company, govt of France, ordinary Twitter users
#TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front)	Tigray political party fighting for autonomy from the Ethiopian govt	1. TPLF is a terrorist organisation akin to ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabab. 2. Autonomy of the Tigray region is not in danger. 3. The coalition Ethiopian govt's action led by Abiy Ahmad's are in the interest of Tigray.	1. TPLF demands are legitimate and in the interest of Tigrayans. 2. The Ethiopian government led by Abiy Ahamad is harming the interest of the Tigray region by making a peace deal with Eritrea.	East Africa: Ethiopia Eritrea Somalia	Tigrayans, Amhara, Afar, Oromo, govt of Ethiopia, govt of Eritrea, ordinary Twitter users



#ISWAP (Islamic State West African Province)	ISIS offshoot active in Nigeria and other western African countries	1. Fulani Herdsmen are in cahoots with ISIS and Boko Haram. 2. That Fulani's attacks on farmers have nothing to do with land resources.	1. Fulani nomadic herdsman have an equal, historic and legitimate right on the pastures for their cattle grazing. 2. That the conflict in Nigeria is primarily herder-farmer conflict and not a religious one.	West Africa: Nigeria Niger Chad	Borno state (Kanuri people), ISIS, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, Fulani, Herdsmen, Ordinary Twitter users
#landverraders	Relates to returning ISIS foreign fighters. This particular hashtag which means 'traitor' in Dutch relates to Netherlands	1. The returning Dutch ISIS fighters or their children should not be repatriated from Syrian prison-camps. 2. Returning recruits are a threat to national security of European countries.	1. It is the duty of countries to take back their citizens and not expect countries like Iraq, Syria and Turkey to deal with the challenge of managing the captured foreign ISIS recruits and their families.	Netherlands Europe UK	Govt of Netherlands, Europeans, Syrians ISIS foreign recruits Ordinary Twitter users
#GeneralQasimSuleimani	The assassination of Iran's Qasim Suleimani who headed its Quds force and is celebrated as a hero for his fight against the enemies of Iran including the ISIS.	1. The USA assassinated a true human rights defender who was instrumental in Iran's fight against ISIS. 2. Suleimani is a martyr who sacrificed his life fighting for the just cause in line with <i>Abul-Bayt's</i> tradition. 3. He was actively helping Palestinians realise their legitimate political goals.	1. Suleimani committed crimes against humanity in carrying out international operations for Iran. 2. He killed scores of innocent people including Kurds for Iranian national interest.	Arabian Peninsula USA and some parts of Europe	Iranians, Iraqis, Kurds, people in the USA and Europe Ordinary Twitter users

**#iceisis** as the name of this hashtag suggests, it aims to arrest – to ice – the online influence of ISIS. This hashtag is found to be widely used by one of our critical nodes that was discussed above *@ctrlsec* whose primary motive is to target ISIS’s twitter accounts by asking its followers to report it to Twitter and get them permanently suspended. CtrlSec which is based in France defines its activities as his battle against “online Jihadis” and claims to have taken down more than 25,000 Twitter accounts in 2015 (Channel 4, 2015). Besides CtrlSec, a lot of ordinary people’s accounts also use this hashtag to mock ISIS. Figure 52 illustrate the use of **#iceisis** to mock ISIS. Whereas Figure 53 provide examples of digital targeting of ISIS by Anonymous hacktivist who are also the creators and drivers of **#iceisis**.



Figure 52: Use of **#iceisis** to mock ISIS



Figure 53: Anonymous hacktivist targeting ISIS using #iceisis

One finds examples of rich discursivity which gets circulated around attaching itself to #ISIS and #iceisis. For example, the following Tweet, displayed in Figure 54A, is an example of undermining the original function of #iceisis by linking its very foundation with the prominent state actors. It is arguing that there exists a greater collusion of ISIS, USA, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar (represented through their respective national flags L to R) calling them ‘ISIS muppets’. This narrative matches the narrative projected by Siasat PK that ISIS is a conspiracy against Islam and Muslims.



Figure 54: Use of #iceisis (A) and #Lafarge (B)

Besides the usual and popular hashtag suspects like the *#Islam*, *#Kabul*, *#Taliban*, *#AlQaeda*, and *#jihad*; *#Lafarge* is one amongst the top 20 hashtags which was abundantly used with *#ISIS*. Lafarge, a French cement company, was trending recently with *#ISIS* due to their involvement in paying a huge sum of money to ISIS for its continued operation in Syria. One can clearly see from the network, an enhanced co-occurrence of hashtags *#French*, *#France*, *#Syria* with *#ISIS* due to this event.

Networks can clearly capture the pulse of a conversation around an important event in a way which is easy to visualize and interpret. In fact, one of our critical nodes *Siasat.pk* highlighted the Lafarge case to argue that France (often used as a synonym to represent Global North in some narratives especially on Secularism) is funding ISIS and that this case is an example of ‘West’s’ hypocrisy and double standards on issues of Human Rights. Figure 54B is the example of Siasat PK, one of the actors who has emerged as a key player in the conversation on ISIS, using *#Lafarge*.

*#TPLF* is another significant hashtag used with *#ISIS*. TPFL (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) is a political party in Ethiopia that claims itself to be the rightful representative of people of Tigray region in the country. Ethiopia has had a complex colonial (Ethiopia was an Italian colony) and ethnic context where transnational indigenous ethnic groups like the Oromo, Tigrayans, Amhara and Afar, amongst many others form a challenging socio-political matrix. TPLF has been in conflict with the Ethiopian coalition government led by Abiy Ahmed (who also won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his role in securing peace in the long-drawn conflict between Ethiopia and neighbouring Eritria) after it refused to join the Prosperity Party following dissolution of the earlier coalition. Now, the question is why *#TPLF* is used with *#ISIS*? What is the connection? The following Tweets are helpful in understanding the context which is bringing the use of *#TPLF* and *#TPLF* together wherein the Tweet in Figure 55 equate TPLF with ISIS and other UN-designated terrorist organisations and make a case for TPLF to be declared a terrorist organisation.



Figure 55: Tweet comparing TPFL to ISIS, AL Qaeda etc.

It is most interesting to observe that ideas and events which are not directly linked with each other are also brought together by people in order to argue their case. This is exactly what is happening here because the users which are using #TPLF and #ISIS together are demanding the international community to declare TPLF as a terrorist organisation because they argue its actions exactly match ISIS. Since ISIS enjoys high currency in the digital discursive practices, therefore by connecting the Ethiopian case with ISIS alongside *Boko Haram* and *Al-Shabab*, the interested parties are providing it a stronger shuttle to launch itself. Moreover, the data gathered for this work clearly shows that #TPLF with #ISIS are being used mainly by people of Ethiopia both Muslim and non-Muslim, the fact that many Muslim on Twitter used ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabab and clubbed them together as a terrorist organisation in order to target TPLF provides evidence against an argument which believes that organisations like *ISIS*, *Boko Haram* and *Al-Shabab* enjoy wide Muslim support.

Similarly, #ISWAP has been found to be widely used with #ISIS. ISWAP stands for Islamic State West African Province. According to the United Nations Security Council, ISWAP is one of the previous factions of ISIL-West Africa however, owing to the infighting within the group, which arose at the time when ISIS chose Abu Musab al-Barnawi's faction (ISWAP) over Abubakar Mohammed Shekau's faction (Boko Haram); they separated ways in 2016. The group has carried out several attacks in Nigeria especially in the Borno state of Nigeria.

The following Tweet shows the use of #ISWAP with #ISIS making a case for a collusion between nomadic Fulani herdsmen, Boko Haram, and ISIS; criticising President Muhammadu Buhari's government for inaction in the context of increasing clashes between the farming communities (mainly Christians) and cattle-grazing Fulani groups (mainly Muslims) (Figure 56).



Figure 56: Example of Islamisation of Fulani Herdsmen using #ISIS

Anti-Fulani sentiment has grown in Nigeria due to constant clashes between the ethnic Fulani cattle herders, who are not represented by a single leader or group but are perceived as a single



unit by the farming community which is in conflict with them. They are seen to be colluding with the Hausa ethnic group in the region who are mainly Muslims. The clashes which are rooted in competition for land and resources are increasingly painted as a communal conflict (Mikailu, 2016). Fulanis were instrumental in revival of Islam in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mikailu, 2016). The above Tweet is an example of how Fulanis are increasingly labelled to be part of the larger Islamic project led by ISWAP, *Boko Haram* and *Al-Shabab* in the Western Africa and therefore the Islamisation of Fulani herdsmen even when the original conflict pertains to land resources. This is yet another example of how a popular idea i.e., ISIS is being used by disparate groups in order to seek a wider audience to create a negative public opinion about a group of people who happen to be Muslims.

*#landverraders* is another co-occurring hashtag which was prominently shared with *#ISIS*. The following Figure 57 is a close-up of an earlier shared hashtag network in Figure 51 in order to understand this hashtag better.

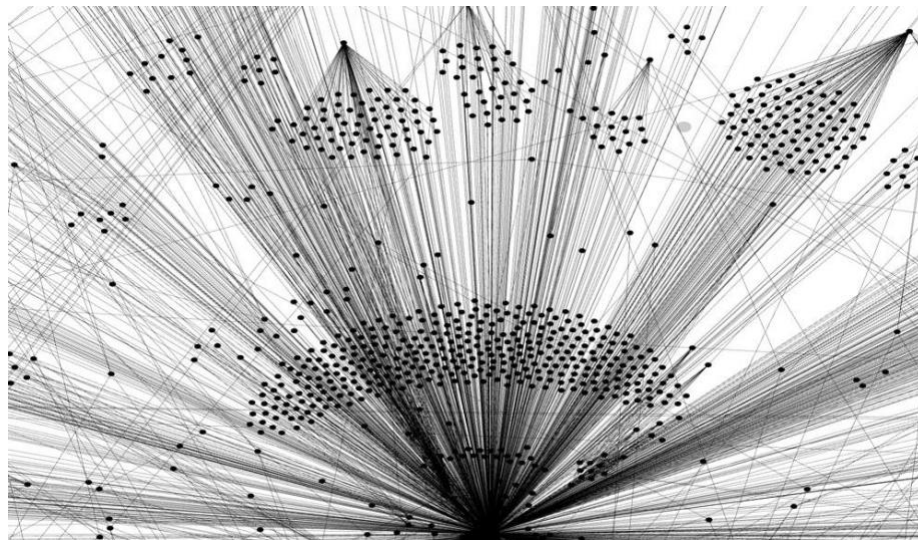


Figure 57: Closer look at *#landverraders*

*#landverraders* in the blue circle is a terminal node. *Landverraders* in Dutch means traitors. This hashtag has been found to be used by the right-wing Dutch population to target Muslim immigrants in Holland. This hashtag also has direct connections with *#targets* and *#opiceisis*. Users from @CtrlSec are converging on *#landverraders*.

Figure 58 is an example of use *#landverraders* to subvert the demand to repatriate Dutch citizens lodged in the Syrian-prison camp.

Translated from Dutch by Google

Too insane for words.  
#ISIS supporters do not belong in our country.  
They should never have had a Dutch passport.

Those who made up the rules, so that it happened anyway, must if #landverraders be tried, and their wrongful decisions reversed!



Roelof Bouwman @RoelofBouwman · Dec 11, 2020

Uw nieuwe buren. Anders weten we straks niet meer waar ze zijn.  
[telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1581465...](https://telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1581465...)

11:02 PM · Dec 11, 2020 · Twitter for Android

Figure 58: #landverraders tweet examples

The following tweet (Figure 59) can be helpful in understanding the nature of use of #landverraders which in this case is arguing for Dutch ISIS fighter's execution.

Translated from Dutch by Google

At war with #isis . We have to #jihadisten in #Nederland don't keep an eye on it. We have to evict them or execute them.#landverraders

11:01 PM · Jun 3, 2017 · Twitter Web App

Figure 59: Example of tweet using #landverraders

The above Tweets in Figure 58 and Figure 59 is also an example of longevity of popular meme hashtags as one Tweet is from 2017 and the other is from 2020. These Tweets are set in the backdrop of western recruits in ISIS as after ISIS's defeat there was a big debate on the returning recruits and national security of parent countries. In November 2019 a court in The Hague asked the Netherlands to repatriate children of a Dutch ISIS fighters who were lodged in Syrian prison-camps (Hofstee, 2020). This sparked a heated debate in the country which widely used #landverraders as a vessel.

*#GeneralQasimSulaimani* is also one of the key hashtags which was trending for a long time after the popular Iranian General Qasim Sulaimani, a hero for the Iranians and Shias in general, who headed Iranian Quds Force but was assassinated by a US drone in Iraq. Sulaimani was trending with ISIS as his supporters believe that he was instrumental in containing the influence and winning spree of ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. While Iranians consider him a martyr, he is fiercely criticised by other parties like the Kurds who call him a terrorist for attacking the Peshmerga in Kirkuk.

The network metrics calculated for *#ISIS* reveals several important insights. The network is densely connected with a graph density of 0.69. This measure tells us how many actual connections there between nodes are as compared to how many connections are possible. Deciphering from the density measure, 69% of total possible connections have been realised. Densely connected networks facilitate multiple pathways for flow of information as compared to sparse networks.

The following Figure 60 show the global distribution pattern of *#ISIS* wherein one can clearly see some parts of the map like the USA, Europe, Brazil, India, Singapore showing very high engagement with this topic.

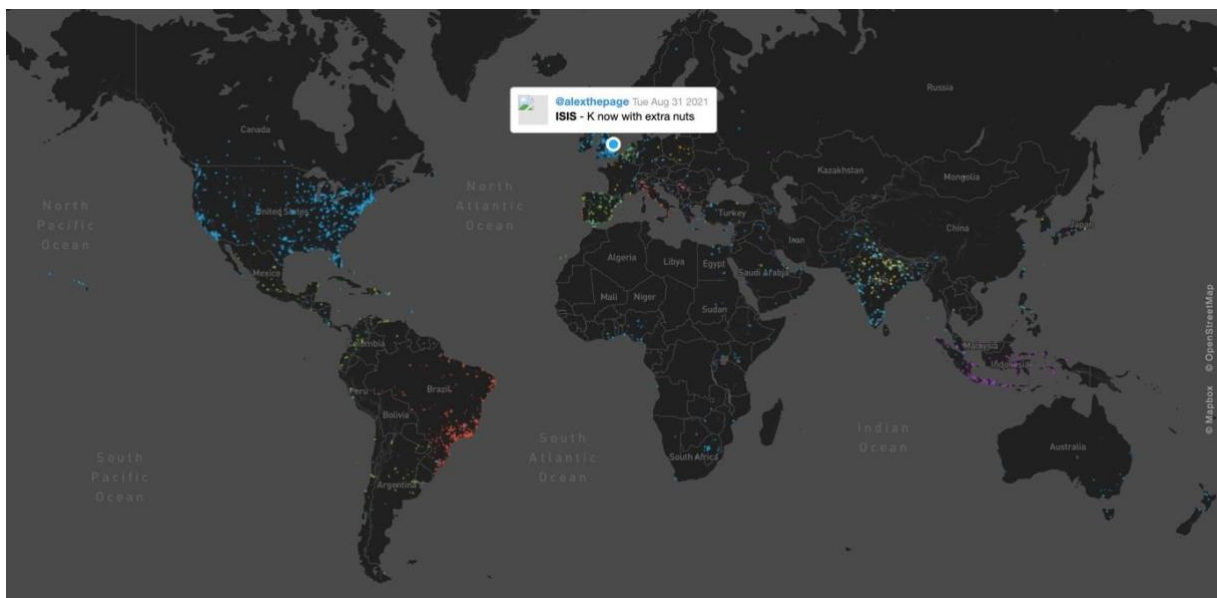


Figure 60: Global engagement pattern of *#ISIS*



### Network 3: Actor Network of #Halal

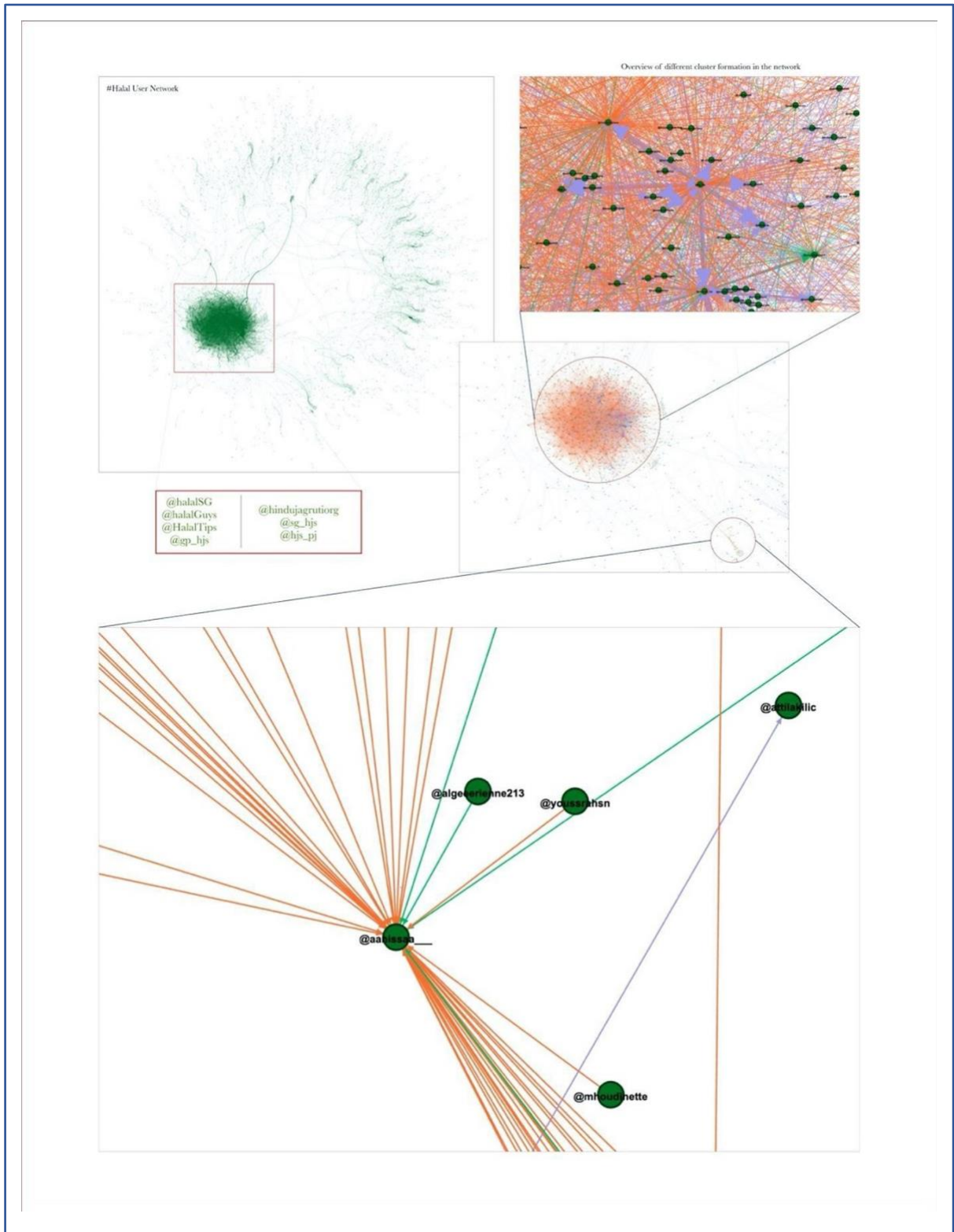


Figure 61: Actor network of #Halal

The following table is introducing some of the major actors who the network shows are defining and shaping the discourse on the Islamic concept of *Halal* using #Halal.

Table 16: Main actor using #Halal

Twitter Handle	User name	Twitter Verified	Following Count	Follower Count	Account Description	Possible location
@halalSG	halalSG	Yes	107	75.3K	Official account of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) on Halal food & certification queries. Information now comes in bite-sized servings.	Singapore
@HalalGuys	The Halal Guys	Yes	57	10K	The Halal Guys are bringing American Halal Food to the masses! Come see why we are different!	New York
@HinduJagrutiOrg	Hindu Janajagruti Samiti	No	156	49.8K	Official account of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti : Let's unite to establish Hindu Rashtra ! Please visit : <a href="http://HinduJagruti.org">http://HinduJagruti.org</a>	India

In Islamic theologically the concept of Halal, can be applied to any act which is permitted (Halal) or not-permitted (Haram) however, in the popular parlance it is mostly used in relation to food which is fit to be consumed or the procedure to make it Halal, for example, how to kill an animal in order to make its meat permissible to be consumed. Similarly, eating pig or any animal who has naturally died, has been declared 'Haram' in Quran. Owing to these Islamic concepts, many companies market their products with a 'Halal' label, certifying that the product adheres to the prescribed Islamic requirements. This practice of labelling products and eating joints, with a 'Halal' label has been the cause of debate and even conflicts in countries where Muslims are in minority. Some people argue that this is an exclusionary practice which automatically benefits Muslim businesses and therefore has economic consequences. In 2019, when *McDonald's India* specified that all their restaurants are 'Halal Certified' there was a backlash from some people who used #boycottMcDonalds hashtag on Twitter (India Today, 2019) and demanded to know that in a country with more than 80% non-Muslim population, why is McDonald's forcing the non-Muslims to eat Halal food. Following is example of use of ##boycottMcDonalds arguing that buying only from Halal certified place is a discriminatory practice as it negatively impacts the non-halal meat businesses (Figure 62).



Figure 62: Example of uses of #BoycottHalal

The actor network generated for #Halal also confirms that the conversation over Halal label for food and other products is a major point of contestation between a diverse set of stakeholders – some arguing from a secular standpoint as to why should food companies label their food with a specific communities’ religious preferences while some of them using it as an excuse to further their communal agenda and hate politics. For example, the following Tweet is equating buying Halal food with funding terrorism (Figure 63).



Figure 63: Tweet equating buying halal to funding terrorism

## Discussing the key actors

Three actors – @HinduJagrutiOrg, @SG\_HJS, @HJS\_PJ – out of the key five actors are related to one organisation – Hindu Janajagruti Samiti. The two individual users are mostly sharing the Tweets from @HinduJagrutiOrg, therefore it would suffice to discuss only @HinduJagrutiOrg. Following is an example of a typical Tweet advancing the narrative on the economic model of products promoting Halal lifestyle terming it Economic Jihad.

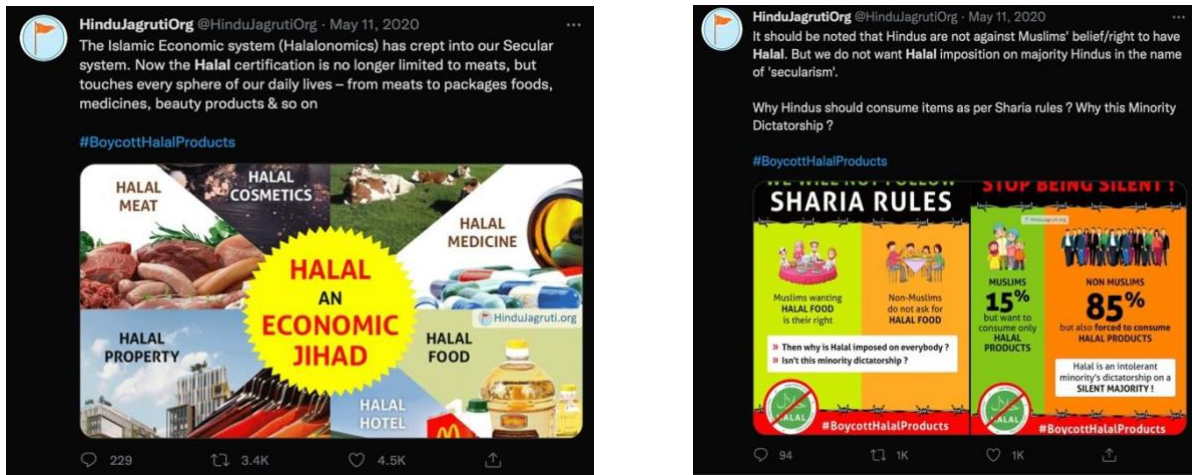


Figure 64: Tweet activities of @HinduJagrutiOrg

@HinduJagrutiOrg is a handle which describes itself as an “Official account of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti: Let’s unite to establish Hindu Rashtra...”. The idea of Hindu Rashtra originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century alongside the demand for a separate country for Muslims culminating, in 1947, into what is Pakistan and Bangladesh today. This critical event can be seen as the watershed moment in the modern history of the Indian subcontinent. It not just led to a new political map of the erstwhile British India, it also provided impetus to movements which imagined India as a country of ‘Hindus’. A quick survey of the timeline of HinduJagruti.Org makes it evident that they are opposing the idea of Halal labelling on various commercial products and services besides food, which the said handle labels as ‘Halalonomics- the Islamic Economic system’. As one can see in Figure 64 that this handle is also labelling the practice of Halal as a form of ‘Economic Jihad’ by Muslims. It would be useful to point out that *Jihad* as a term has been exploited in different contexts in relations to discursive practices on Islam and Muslims. For example, during the ongoing COVID19 crisis, a term ‘Corona Jihad’ was coined and widely used by a section of people in India. A similar usage trend of the term ‘Jihad’ can also be seen in Figure 64 in the construct ‘Halal Jihad’ used with #BoycottHalalProducts. The Tweet by @HinduJagrutiOrg is mainly addressed to non-Muslims trying to make them aware about various forms of ‘menace’ of Halal consumption besides Halal food like ‘Halal Medicine’, ‘Halal Cosmetics’, ‘Halal Property’, etc. (Figure 64). It urges the ‘silent majority’ (the non-Muslims) to not consume products which have been produced in



accordance with the 'Sharia laws'.

In order to resist and react to Halal food, a non-halal movement has surfaced in India which packages itself as *Jhatka*-nomics (Manish, 2021). *Jhatka* in Hindi means 'in one go', where its advocates claim slaughtering of animals is 'free from ritual and torture' as is not the case according to them in Halal slaughter. Fearing backlash by non-Muslim communities, many meat retailers, have started to stay away from Halal labels even when they procure Halal meat (Honig, 2018).

Most of the actors in this data are coming from Asia, however, this doesn't suggest that things in the West are very different. A study in 2016 analysed more than 50,000 social media posts and found that most of the Islamophobic Tweets around Halal are likely to come from Europe, USA, and Australia (Honig, 2018). #BanHalal, #traditionalbutchers, #BanHalalCertification, #Halalscam, are some of the hashtags which were found to be prevalent in Europe. The following Figure 65 provides an example of this from the UK where a handle @HalalWatchUK is arguing against Halal Certification, Religious Slaughter and calling the Halal food industry a scam.



Figure 65: A Tweet by @HalalWatchUK

Figure 66 presents another example from the UK where the concern for animal welfare in banning Fox hunting, a popular sport with some, is compared with allowing non-stunned slaughter of animals in the name of religion. It uses hashtag #BanHalal to argue banning Halal-style slaughtering which is considered more cruel in comparison to pre-stunned slaughtering.



Figure 66: Use of #BanHalal

The other two important users, which the network analysis has foregrounded are either promoting Halal consumption or facilitating it. @halalSG is the verified account and describes itself as the “Official account of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) on Halal food & certification queries. Information now comes in bite-sized servings. Most of the posts on this account are in response to the queries and clarification sought by Muslims in Singapore on Halal food and if the restaurants they wish to visit are Halal certified.”

The other user is @HalalGuys which is an account for the chain of restaurants called – The Halal Guys. The handle describes itself as “*The Halal Guys are bringing American Halal Food to the masses! Come see why we are different!*” and based in New York, USA.” This is also a certified account. This is primarily a marketing and promotional account wherein the account post information about their restaurants and menu items.

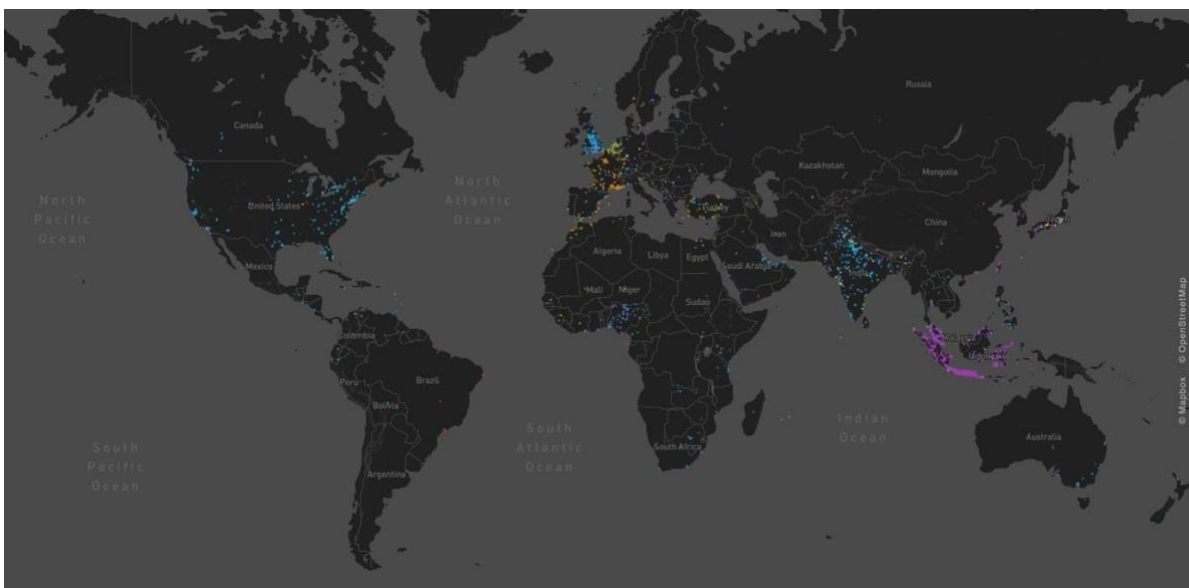


Figure 67: Geographic engagement of #Halal

Figure 67 show the global distribution pattern of *#Halal* wherein one can clearly see some parts of the map like the USA, Europe, UK, India, Singapore showing high engagement with this topic.

#### **Network 4: #Halal Co-occurring Hashtags**

The following network highlights the hashtags which are centred around *#Halal*. These co-occurring hashtags can indicate the key topics on which the major conversation around the concept of Halal is happening. The network suggests that majority of dialogue is happening around Muslim practices especially food and finance. Another important aspect that has come to the fore through the finding of the following network is that a substantial number of hashtags are originating and getting circulated in Indonesian and Malay suggesting that they are emerging from Indonesia and Malaysia. This, at the first instant, might not be very surprising as Indonesia and Malaysia both are Muslim majority countries. In fact, according to some estimates Indonesia houses the largest number of Muslims in the world (Statista, 2010). However, given the fact that both Indonesia and Malaysia are Muslim-majority countries, it is quite obvious that the meat producing industry in these countries would be Halal, then the question is why many people from these countries are so are choosing to use this hashtag. While it is understandable for people coming from immigrant communities in non-Muslim countries to use *#Halal* in order to promote awareness and importance of Halal consumption amongst their peer group, the fact that hubs are emerging in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia sharing *#Halal* especially coupled with other hashtags like *#halalfood*, *#halalinvestments*, *#halallifestyle*, *#islamicreminders*, *#halalindonesia*, *#halalovers*, *#halalisforeveryone*; may suggest the increased interest and mindfulness about their religious identity plus an aspiration to perfect their religious practices by applying halal concept in all spheres of their lives.



The following graph show the clusters of hashtags frequently used with #Halal.

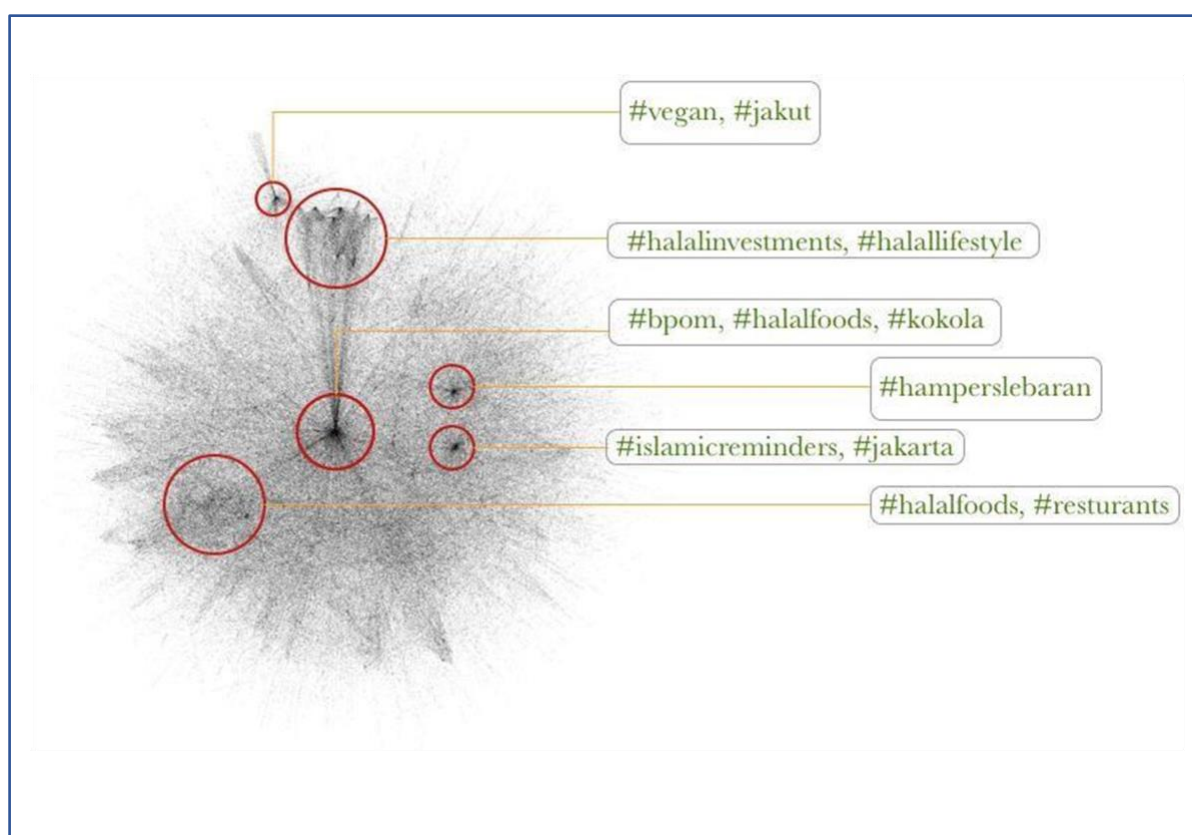


Figure 68: Co-occurring hashtag network of #Halal

Table 17: Key co-occurring hashtags of #Halal

Co-occurring hashtag	Origin related to	Constructed/reinforced ideas using the hashtag	Subverted ideas using the hashtag	Spread	Communities involved
#halalinvestment	Rooted in the Quranic and Hadith-based ideas ( <i>Riba</i> ) that promote investing in trade instead of earning profits through charging interest on financial dealings. Promotion of commercial Halal investment products	Profits can be earned in accordance to Sharia. Earning based on interest is haram. A true believer would invest in Islamic finance.	Western financial instruments are the best and just tools to generate wealth through savings and investments.	Mainly Singapore Indonesia Malaysia	Mainly Islamic banking institutions and individuals.
#halallifestyle	Rooted in ideas that all sphere of life should be guided by Islamic teachings.	Follow Islamic way of life and products in all spheres of everyday activities	Subverting or resisting the use of more secular products	Global	Muslims - individuals and businesses
#halalfood #bpom #kokola	Rooted in Islamic teachings which prohibit eating animals who died a natural death, meat	Muslims should only consume food which is permissible and processed according to Islamic laws.	Builds a narrative undermining the consumption	Global especially Singapore Malaysia Indonesia	Muslims - individuals and businesses

	of pig, and food that has been dedicated to someone other than Allah. Promotion of commercial products by Halal food industry.		of non-halal food	USA	
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*#halalinvestment* is a hashtag that is often used with *#islamicfinance*, *#Halalfunds*, *#Sharia*, *#islamicrealestate*, mainly by businesses who are operating in the realm of Islamic finance according to which earning profits by charging interest on your money is haram and the right way to generate wealth is through investing and sharing profits. The following examples displaying the use of *#islamicbusiness* and *#halalinvestment* indicate that halal investment as a practice and aspiration is quite popular amongst many Muslims (Figure 69).



Figure 69: Use of *#islamicbusiness* and *#halalinvestment*



Figure 70: Use of *#islamicrealestate*

The above example, in Figure 70, talks about ‘getting rid of *Riba*’ which is a concept rooted in Islam that means interest-charged by the lender on the money. This practice is considered exploitative in Islam and therefore denounces western banking model which is primarily based on earning profits through charging interest from borrowers. A parallel banking model is instead practised in Islamic countries called the Islamic or Sharia banking. Islamic banking is also practised in many non-Islamic countries.

Most of the other #Halal co-occurring hashtags – #bamperslebaran, #jakarta, #bpom (Indonesia’s National Agency of Drug and Food Control), #jakut, #kokola (a ‘Halal’ biscuit brand)- are originating in Indonesia and are mostly linked to the halal food industry. The data from actors and hashtags network show that Indonesia and Malaysia have emerged as epicentres of discourse on #halallifestyle.

### Network 5: #Hijab Hashtag Network

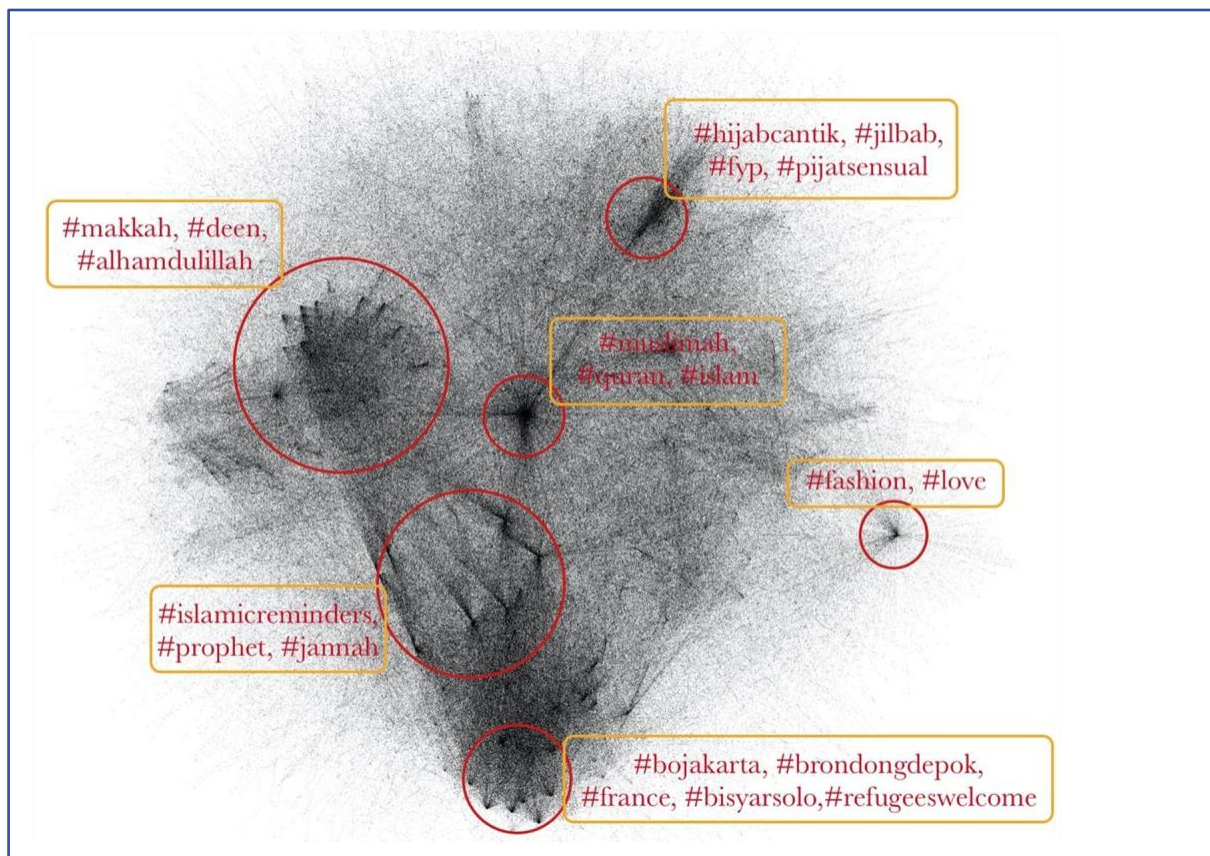


Figure 71: Co-occurring hashtag network of #Hijab

Table 18: Key co-occurring hashtags with #Hijab

Co-occurring hashtag	Origin related to	Constructed/reinforced ideas using the hashtag	Subverted ideas using the hashtag	Spread	Communities involved
# <i>hijabantik</i>	<p>The practice veiling oneself amongst Muslim women.</p> <p>Aspiration to follow the Islamic practices in everyday contexts.</p> <p>The attacks on Hijab as a sign of backwardness.</p>	<p>Hijab is a practice integral to everyday Muslim culture.</p> <p>Adorning Hijab can be fancy and glamorous.</p> <p>Hijab is not a matter of choice, but a command ordained by the God.</p> <p>Muslim women are not apologetic about practicing hijab.</p>	<p>Hijab is a form of oppression and subjugation of Muslim women.</p> <p>Hijab cannot be a choice and is always imposed.</p> <p>Women who wear Hijab are traditionally submissive.</p> <p>Hijab is a form of 'passive terrorism'.</p>	Indonesia and some parts of East Asia	Mainly Indonesian and its diaspora
# <i>jannah</i>	An Arabic word and Islamic concept which means the paradise or the Garden	<p>Used along with #Hijab to possibly reassert the belief in the Quranic concept of <i>Jannah</i> which is a promised to the believers if they follow the path shown by the God.</p>	<p>That the idea of <i>Jannah</i> and similar religious belief, is a myth created by few in order to control and organises people for a social and political purpose.</p>	Possibly Indonesia and some parts of East Asia	Mainly Indonesian and their diaspora
# <i>islamicreminders</i>	<p>This hashtag is often used to promote the Islamic practices amongst the Muslims.</p> <p>#islamicreminders has also emerged as a key hashtag in #<i>Halal</i>.</p>	Reminding Muslims about the obligatory aspects of practicing Islam	No evidence was found of subversion in the use of this hashtag except the fact that it is used to aggressively promote the codified Islamic practices which in a sense can be seen as negation of any other or a more secular way of life.	Global	Muslims

Since the Twitter API provides a representative global data therefore the data collected from it can a lot of time render results which are incomprehensible given the linguistic limitation of this researcher. In this case, most of the co-occurring hashtags on #Hijab are in Indonesian and therefore possibly emanating from Indonesia. Hence, some of these hashtags which have emerged from the Network were simply not intelligible to this researcher (even after doing comprehensive online research on them). Therefore, Table 18 and the following description only mentions some of the hashtags which the researcher could study.

‘Cantik’ in Indonesian language means beautiful therefore hashtag #hijabcantik stands for beautiful Hijab or Hijab is beautiful. This can be possibly seen as a form of reclaiming identity in the face of increasing attention and negative portrayal of Hijab as a patriarchal tool to oppress women in the garb of religion as well as a tool of ‘passive terrorism’ (Fenstermacher, 2015, p72)

#france has emerged as an important hashtag and common thread across various key topics in this research including #Hijab. France which has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe (Hackett, 2017) passed an amendment in February 2021 that bans girls under the age of 18 to wear Hijab in public alongside mothers when they go to fetch their children from school and Burqini (portmanteau word from a combination of Burqua and Bikni) from beaches (Lang, 2021). This amendment was widely protested especially by Muslim women using #HandsOffMyHijab (Lang, 2021) not just inside France but around the world. France, like many other former colonial powers, has had a long history of conflict with the indigenous cultures of the colonised. Many see the ban on Hijab as a continuation of the White Man’s burden to ‘civilise’ the uncouth and uncivilised East. Frantz Fanon in his essay *Algeria Unveiled* argued that Hijab can be seen as ‘tool of anti-colonial resistance...’ (in Lang, 2021). Leila Ahmed an Egyptian-American scholar and feminist while talking about her work *A Quiet Revolution: The resurgence of the veil from the Middle East to America* (2012), locates this opposition to Hijab or the veil to the Europeans’ perennial need to find the ‘inferior’, ‘uncivilised other’ in order to feel ‘civilised’ and ‘superior’ (Caon, 2021). Following are few examples of Tweets by Muslim women where they are rehearsing the same argument as was suggested by Ahmed and Fanon about Colonialism and the self in relation to the other using #HandsOffMyHijab and #Francehijabban (Figure 72).



"#France is a symbol of colonialism & islamophobia whose anti-Muslim legacy is rooted in 19th & 20th century occupation of North Africa and the Middle East." @MnarMuh

#HandsOffMyhijab 🙅 #francehijabban @MintPressNews

#France has been busy passing laws to ban Muslim girls aged 18 & under from wearing a hijab (whilst making the age of consensual sex 15. Yup). The resounding silence is deafening. As is the growing hate. Colonialism isn't dead. It's just shape-shifting. #HandsoffMyHijab

Figure 72: Use of #handsoffmyhijab

## Subversion networks

The following networks have been generated and analysed to understand how the three dominant ideas which were chosen i.e., ISIS, Halal and Hijab have been subverted using three related co-occurring hashtags i.e.

1. #OpParis to examine subversion in #ISIS
2. #Halalburnour to examine subversion in #Halal
3. #traditionalllysubmissive to examine subversion in #Hijab

### Network 6: #OpParis Actor network

#OpParis also known as Operation Paris is an online hacktivist campaign led by anonymous netizens against ISIS that started in 2015 in the wake of journalists' murder of French magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2015. Their agenda includes exposing ISIS's sensitive digital information like IP address, defacing their accounts and surveilling their 'dark' online activities by getting access to their accounts (Zorabedian, 2016). #OpParis claims to have taken down thousands of ISIS accounts. The regular netizens have used this hashtag to not only show their support to and participate in these digital disruptive operations but also to share memes in order to mock ISIS. Since this hashtag was started in 2015 after the attack on the office of the French magazine Charlie Hebdo, it is interesting to notice that the hashtags have remained active through all these years obviously, that also has to do with the fact that the ISIS has consistently pursued its terror agenda in western cities. However, the fact that out of numerous hashtags which were created at the time

of Charlie Hebdo attack only few survived provide evidence of longevity of successful ideas (Dawkins, 1976) and their applicability to diverse contexts with creative mutations. In this sense #OpParis also becomes the site to understand a successful subversive hashtag meme. It shows how ideas in the Twittersphere traverse time and space even when they originated in response to specific events. Expectedly the top five locations where this hashtag was most active are from Europe as the original incident happened in France. However, it is interesting to notice that in case of #OpParis besides Paris where these attacks happened, most identified users were from Scotland. Although Scotland has a small Muslim population, it has seen a sectarian feuds in the recent past. Also, a recent study in Scotland, 'Tackling Islamophobia', by a cross-party group of Scottish government found that 75% of Muslims claimed to have experienced Islamophobia regularly (Nicolson, 2021) in Scotland. If 75% people out of the total people surveyed are claiming to have experienced Islamophobia, then this might be indicative of communal tensions that maybe existing in Scotland and the activity around hashtags on Islam and Muslims might be related to that. It is important to note that in case of #OpISIS most Tweets are from USA and Europe however, Tunisia stands quite high in the list. Tunisia a Muslim majority north African country, which suddenly erupted in 2011 on the world news map for being the birthplace of popular resistance movement the so-called Arab Spring or Jasmine revolution, has since seen a political rigmarole.

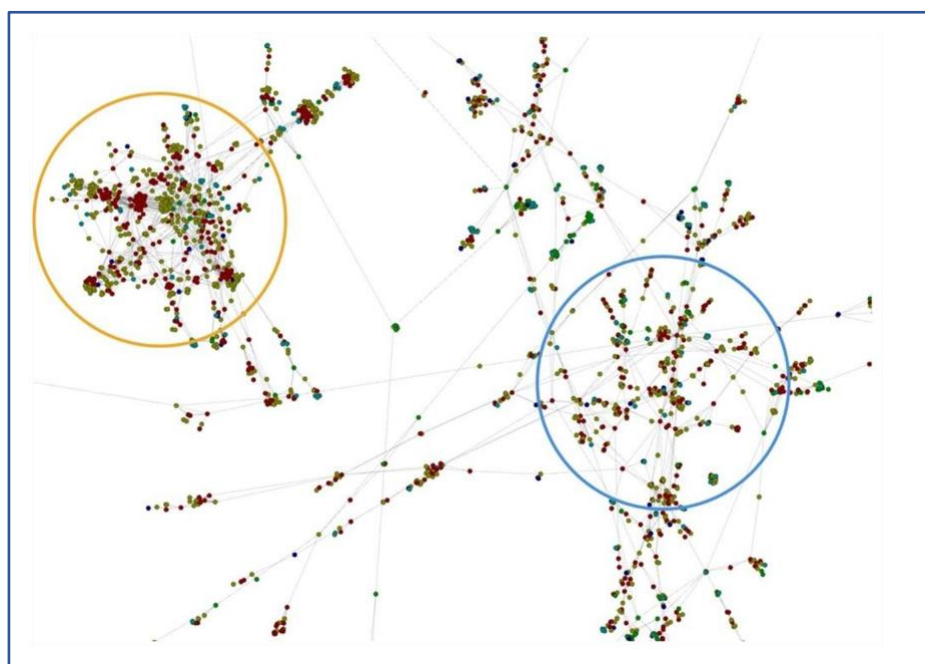


Figure 73: Actor network of #OpParis



Table 19: Key actors of #OpParis

Twitter Handle	User name	Twitter Verified	Following Count	Follower Count	Account's Description	Self-	Possible location
@SebastianDAlex (activity depicted by yellow circle)	Equality Exists	No	166	471	Security Is A Hoax <a href="#">#GhostSec</a> Founder with <a href="#">@_gHOST3301</a>		France Europe
@AnonymisedUser8 (activity depicted by yellow circle)		No	447	2706	Trans Woman, into Malware, OSINT+Sarcasm! Political		Austria
@13lunt420Media (activity depicted by yellow circle)	Blunt <a href="#">#AnonOps</a>	No	808	2201	<a href="#">#INVESTIGATIVE</a> <a href="#">#JOURNALISM</a> <a href="#">#Anonymous</a> <a href="#">#AnonFamily</a> <a href="#">#WeAreAllAssange</a> <a href="#">#InfoSec</a> <a href="#">#OffSec</a> <a href="#">#UrbanExploration</a>		Europe
@primal_species (activity depicted by blue circle)	Fly	No	345	1024	From the primordial ooze, the first steps forth. "Come back!" cry the others, "Stay here, fight for the top of the ooze!" The first extends a hand... "Rise Up"		Can't say

There is a clear pattern in the key actors of #OpParis. The majority of them, leading the attack on ISIS are anonymous hackers whose accounts have been created after the attack on Charlie Hebdo in 2015. The network clearly shows that while these key nodes are setting the agenda, people are using the resources provided by them to participate in digital disruption of ISIS's agenda by sharing their posts and reporting the ISIS accounts highlighted by these anonymous accounts in order to get them suspended from Twitter.

Figure 74, the data on the unique location of #OpISIS users' geographical location show that most of them did not disclose their locations which means they can be from any part of the world. However, the high chunk of users from unknown location are likely to be from France and other parts of Europe where most of the Anonymous hacker (partly inspired by Julian Assange) are located.

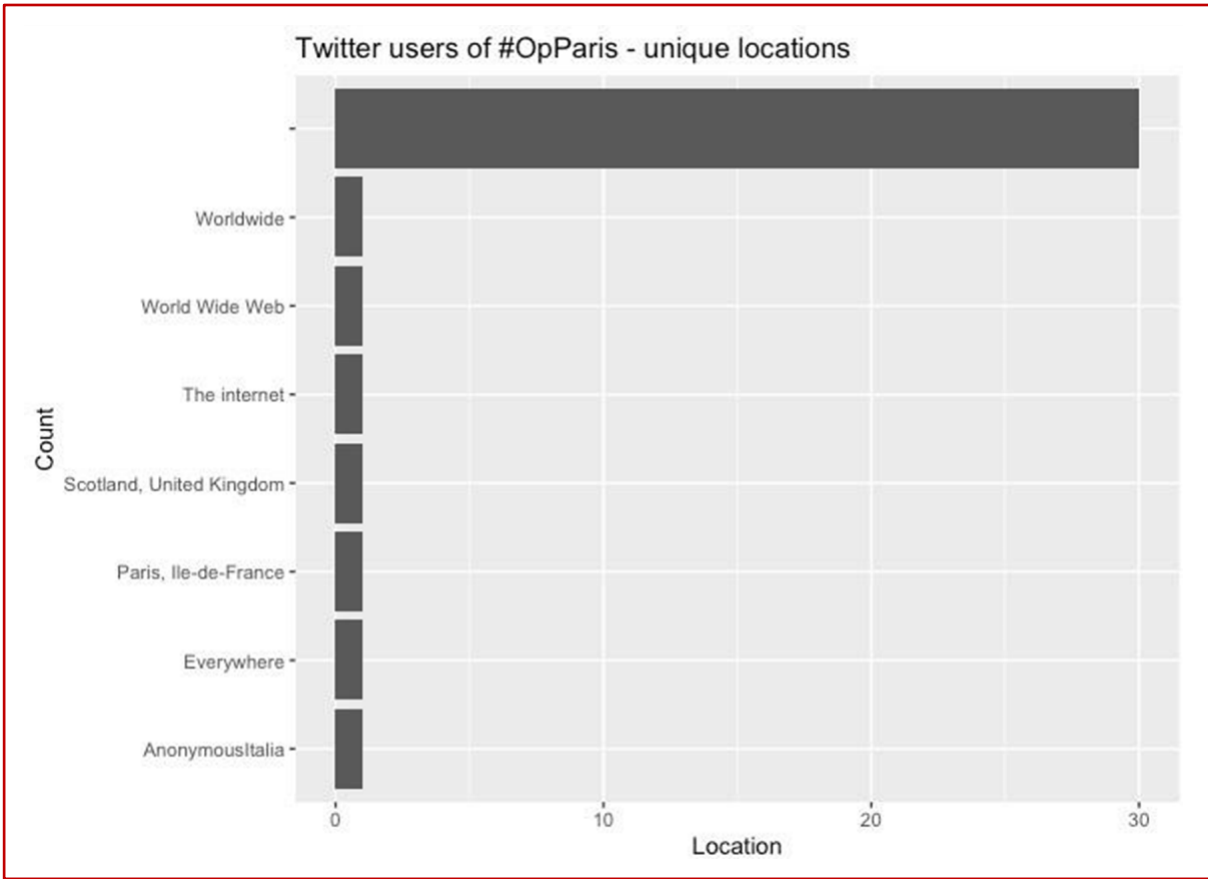


Figure 74: Geographic engagement of #OpParis

## Network 7: #OpParis Co-occurring Hashtags

The following network, Figure 75, shows the major hashtags co-occurring with #OpParis.

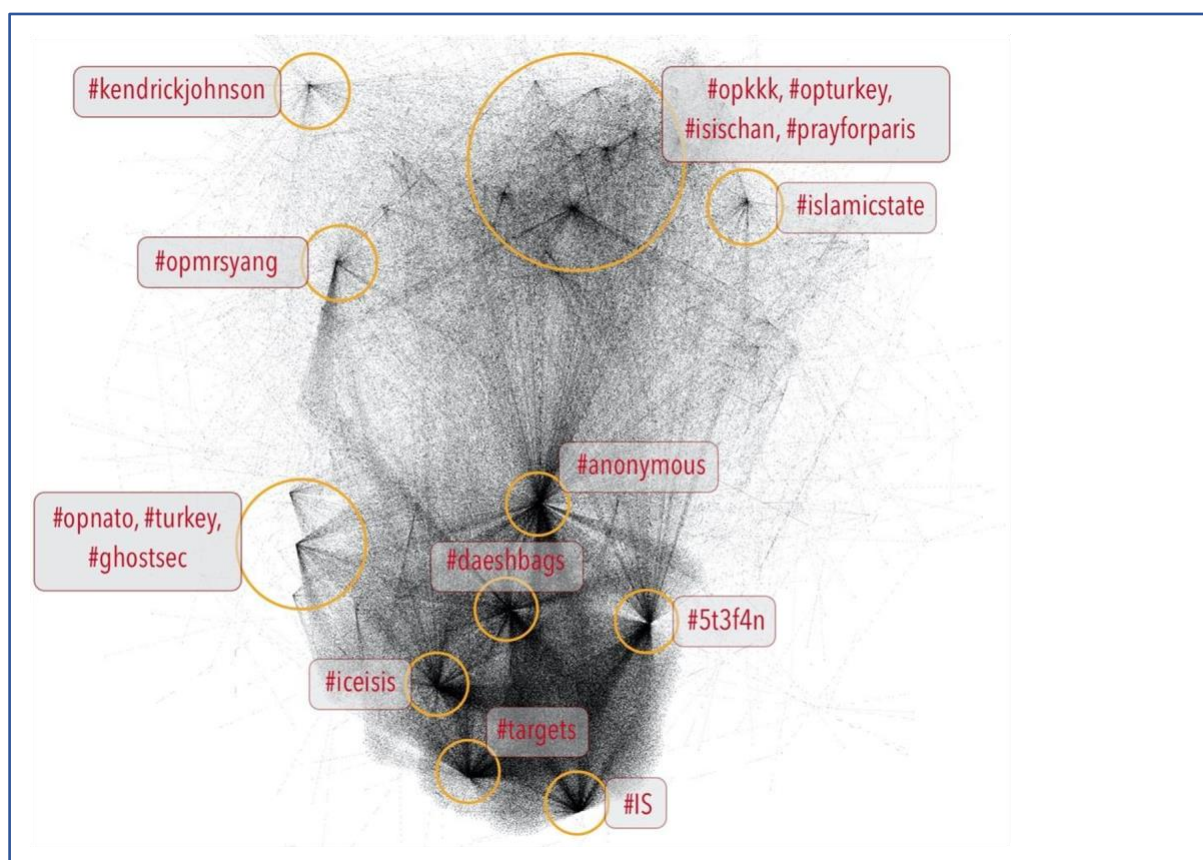


Figure 75: Co-occurring hashtag network of #OpParis

Expectedly #iceisis is again emerging a major hashtag in #OpParis hashtag network, after having emerged as a key hashtag in #ISIS network. The motive and activity of this hashtag has already been discussed in the section on #ISIS however, there are some new and insightful hashtags that are emerging from this network like the #deashbags.

#deashbag originated as an anti-ISIS troll campaign launched by the Anonymous hacktivists as part of the disruptive online campaign to mock and ridicule ISIS by making jokes on them. Some of the memes which were shared as part of the campaign replaced the ISIS recruits with rubber ducks dispersed with mutating other symbols used by ISIS. For example, the following meme, in Figure 76, shared with #deashbag changes the logo of the ISIS flag with a duck's image and corresponding text with 'blah blah blah' written in Arabic script, when the flag's original text reads 'There is no God except Allah, and Mohammad is the messenger of God' which is called *Shabada* meaning an Islamic oath. In this sense, #deashbag was used to subvert the ISIS visual apparatus

that is not only used to instil terror amongst its enemy and intrigue amongst its admirers but also to gain legitimacy by using core Islamic symbols like the *Shahada* which is one of the fundamental five pillars of Islam. It also provides an example of ‘Global Trash (Pye, 2011) akin to the meme family *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix* where random material objects are used to transform the meaning of the original symbols in the subverted imagery.



Figure 76: A visual meme shared using #daeshbag

### Network 8: Actor network of #traditionalsubmissive

#traditionalsubmissive is an example of use of hashtags by Muslim women to actively and overtly subvert the dominant ideas with respect to Muslim women as being suppressed and subjugated through Islamic practices like the *Hijab* and being instrument of ‘passive terrorism’ in practicing Hijab (Fenstermacher, 2015, p72).

In 2016 the then British Prime Minister David Cameron while announcing a new policy of boosting English learning amongst Muslim women for what he packaged as their better integration with the English society, made a connection between poor English-speaking skills of Muslim women and their potential radicalisation from extremist Islamic ideologies as he said Muslim women are more “traditionally submissive” in comparison to other women. This led to a huge digital protest by Muslim women in the UK who shared details on their education, achievements, and contribution to the UK in order to bring home a point about people’s prejudice against them.

Interestingly, most of the Tweets that show up while searching for this hashtag on Twitter are from Muslim women practicing *Hijab*. This concurs with the network results of #Hijab as *#traditionallysubmissive* hashtag figured prominently in #Hijab co-occurring hashtag network. Women practicing Hijab are the ones who seem to have been asserting their Muslim identity, choices, and space the most, in the entire debate while David Cameroon's comment might have been made for Muslim women in general, this was perceived as an attack on and a negative bias against Hijabi women.

### Introducing the actors

All the actors using *#traditionallysubmissive* hashtag are understandably women who are tackling narratives about Islam being an oppressive religion, Hijab as an instrument of passive terrorism (Fenstermacher, 2015, p72), identity as a Muslim woman and immigrant, etc. Although the original issue emanated in the UK, it had resonance across the globe as the actor network of this hashtag revealed a diverse group of women coming from different parts of the globe participating in this in this hashtag resistance.

Following, Figure 77, is the *#traditionallysubmissive* Actor Network:

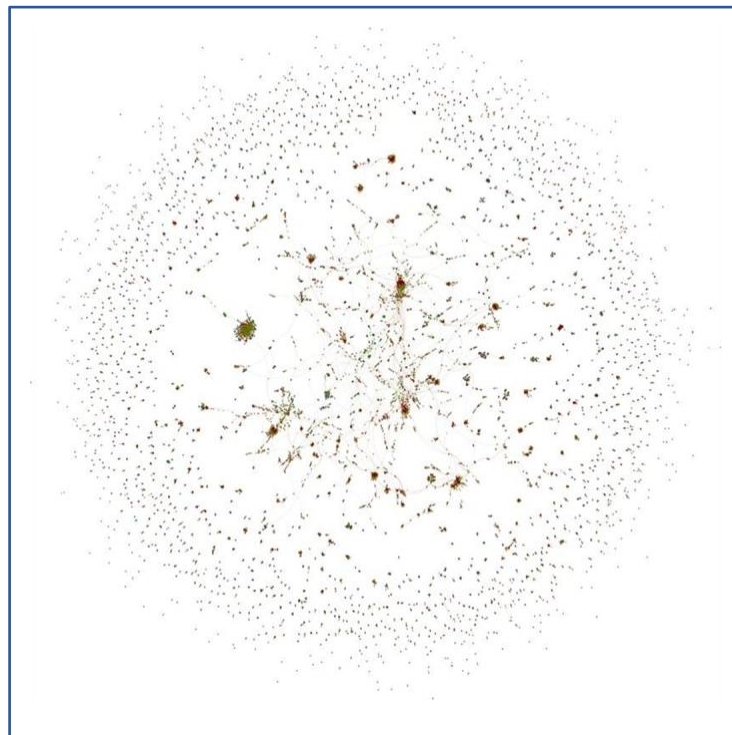


Figure 77: Actor network of #tTraditionallySubmissive

Table 20: Key actors of #TraditionallySubmissive

Twitter handle	User name	Twitter Verified	Following Count	Followers Count	Account's Self-description	Possible Location	Notable features
@LibyaLiberty	Hend Army	Yes	3,322	255.5K	I am East and West, citizen and refugee. The melting pot is a failed paradigm-maybe more like a tossed salad. I am an international crouton.	United Kingdom	Refugee Global outlook
@LajnaUK	Lajna Ima'illah UK	No	57	13K	Official account of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Women's Association in the UK	United Kingdom	Promotes the practice of <i>Hijab</i>
@AnonymisedUser5	-	No	624	34.8K	Director, Jammu <a href="#">#Kashmir</a> . GIFs. Snark. Feminism. Sports. Movies.(Can you take a joke? Good.) <a href="#">#FreeKashmir</a> <a href="#">#StandWithPalestine</a>	Jammu and Kashmir India	Inspired by @LibyaLiberty
@AnonymisedUser6	-	No	1823	2104	Fulbright Scholar. Storyteller at heart/researcher/reader/writer Working on my memoir book. Team member	California USA	Promotes Hijab as a Fashion statement
@AnonymisedUser7	-	No	1048	5016	Faith   Family   Friends I Khilafat. β <a href="#">@Cambridge uni</a> PhD	USA	

The user Hend Army having handle @Libyaliberty is one of the actors leading the conversation on #traditionallysubmissive hashtag. Although, she hasn't mentioned her location in her profile, looking at her timeline it is quite likely that she is located in the United Kingdom. The profile description of this handle describes her as "I am East and West, citizen and refugee..." pointing to the often conflicting, competing identifies amongst many immigrants who find it difficult to fit into any typical national, ethnic or cultural frame. Here are two examples of Twitter posts by her using #traditionallysubmissive hashtag. Figure 78 and Figure 79, is presenting examples of deployment of #traditionallysubmissive hashtag for presenting Hijabi Muslim sportswomen in competitive settings in order to subvert the dominant idea about them being meek and submissive.





Figure 78: Use of #TraditionallySubmissive

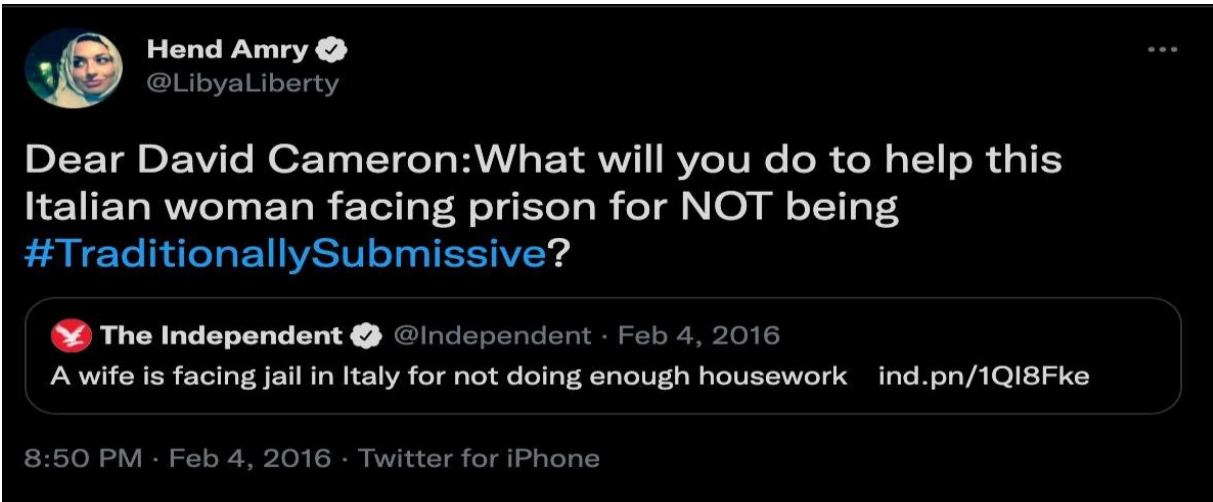


Figure 79: Use of #TraditionallySubmissive

@LajnaUK This handle promotes the practice of Hijab and often reinforces it as a tool of empowerment and education. Other hashtags which are often used by this handle are #passiveterrorism #WomeninIslam #hijab and #headscarf displayed in Figure 80 and Figure 81.



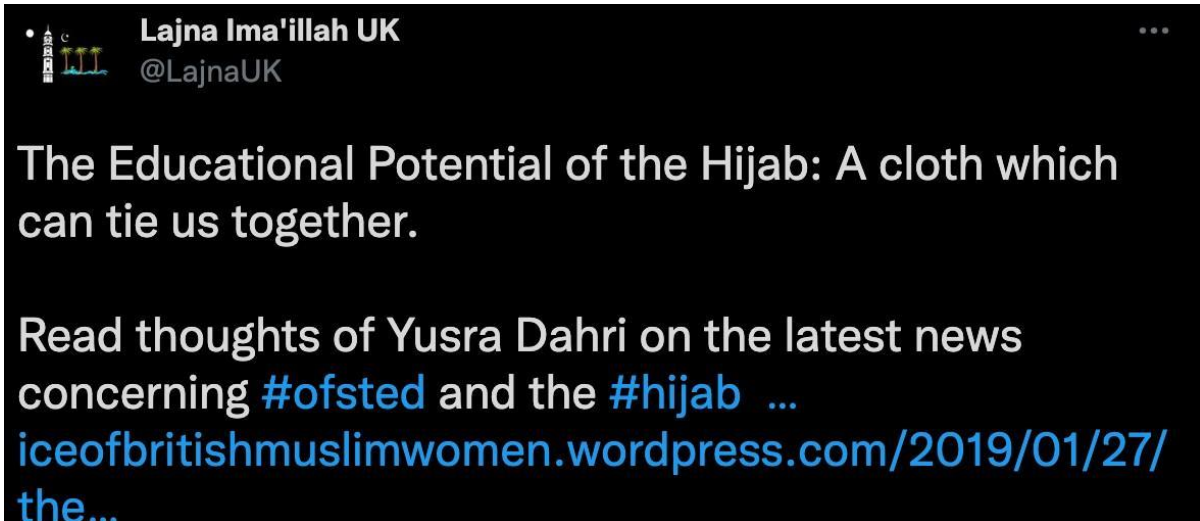


Figure 80: Use of #TraditionallySubmissive by @LajnaUK

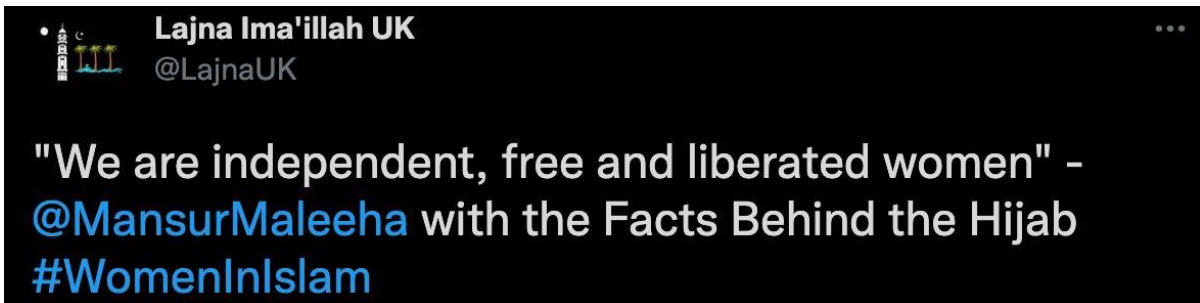


Figure 81: Use of #WomenInIslam by @LajnaUK

@AnonymisedUser5 is based in Kashmir, India and is interestingly inspired by @LibyaLiberty who is based in the UK. This is an example of how users who do not have much in common in terms of place of origin, language, etc.; can come together and form communities on Twitter (Figure 82).



Figure 82: Use of #TraditionallySubmissive by @LibyaLiberty

@AnonymisedUser6 is based in California and views Hijab as a fashion statement and participated in #HijabToMe campaign. Some notable examples of her use of the hashtag (Figure 83).

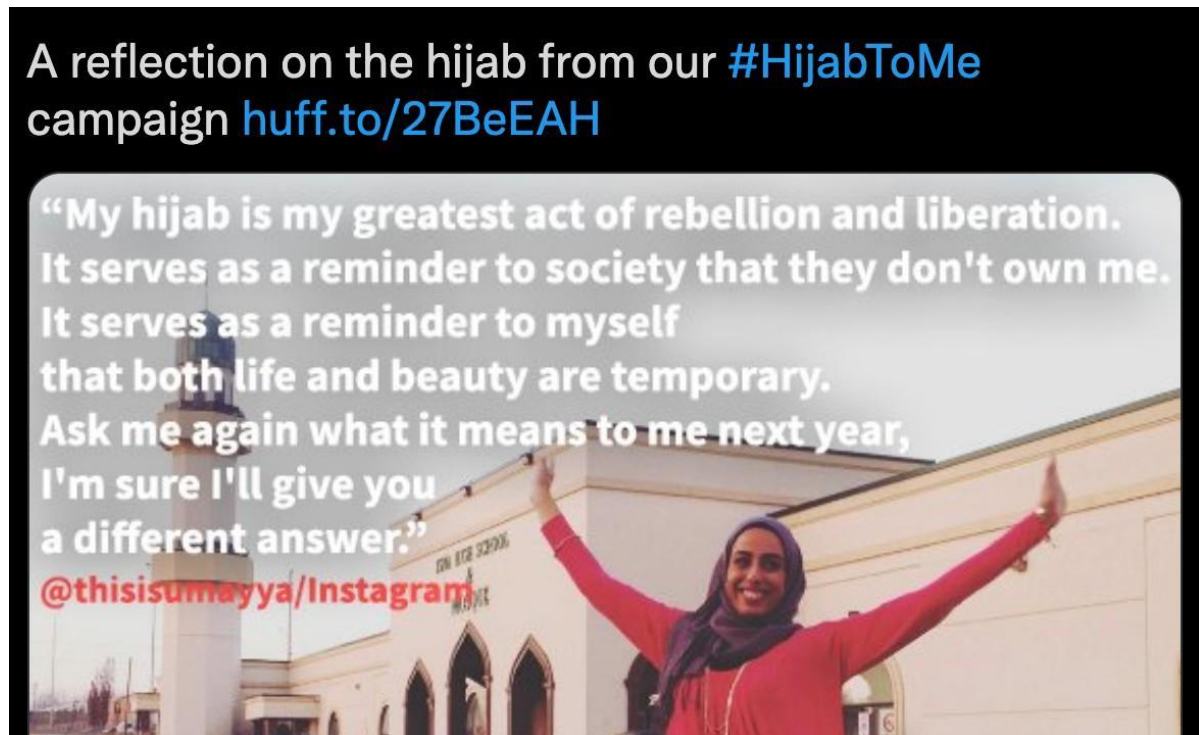


Figure 83: #HijabToMe campaign

@AnonymisedUser7 is based in USA. The below Tweet suggests the undercurrents of racism in the discourse on Islam and Muslims where Muslims might be generally seen as non-Whites.



Figure 84: A example highlighting racism

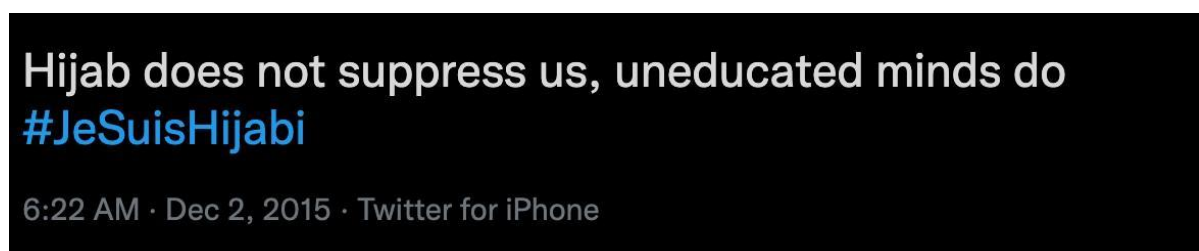


Figure 85: An example of practicing Hijab

## Network 8: Hashtag network of *#traditionalsubmissive*

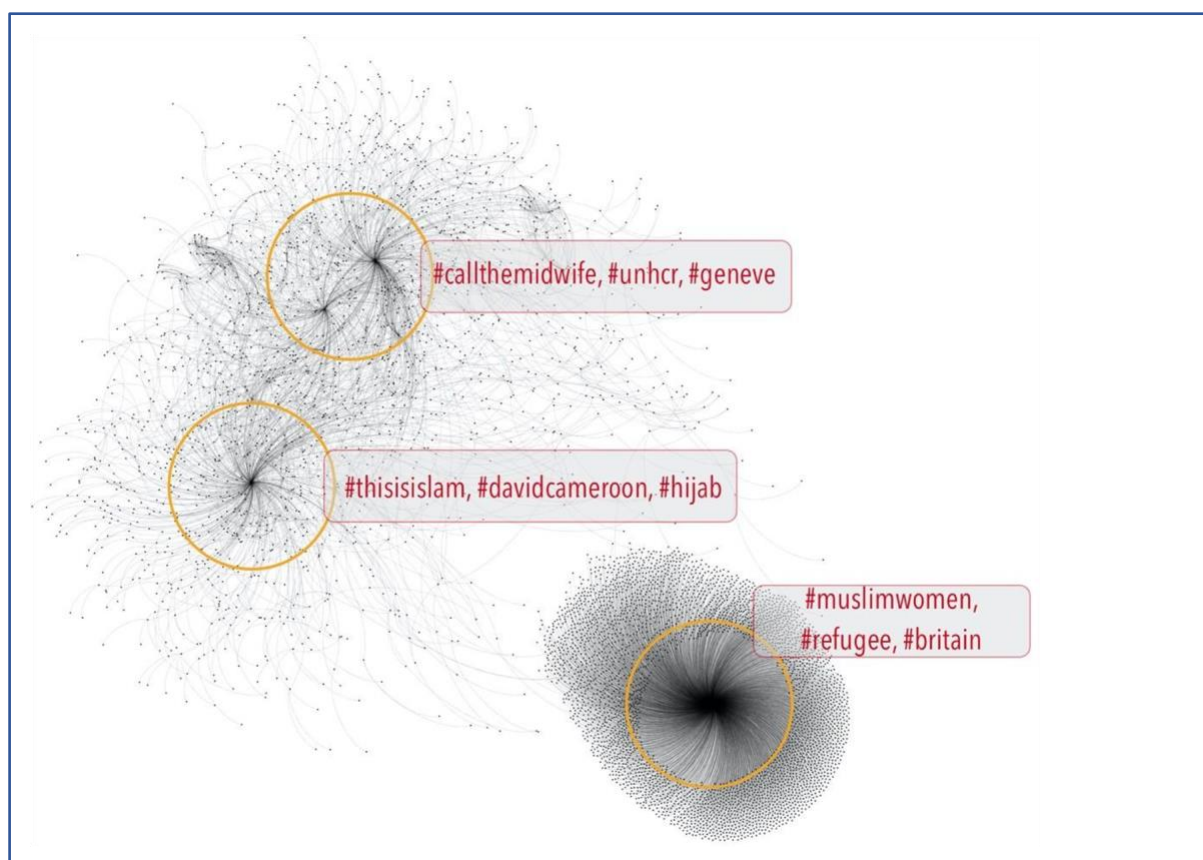


Figure 86: Co-occurring hashtag network of *#TraditionallySubmissive*

The major co-occurring hashtags that have been used with *#traditionalsubmissive* are *#hijab*, *#muslimwomen*, *#refugee*, *#thisisislam*, *#davidcameroon* (Table 21).

Table 21: Key hashtags of *#TraditionallySubmissive*

Co-occurring hashtag	Origin related to	Constructed/reinforced ideas using the hashtag	Subverted ideas using the hashtag	Spread	Communities involved
<i>#davidcameroon</i>	This started with David Cameroon's comment in 2016 as a UK PM that Muslim women are traditionally submissive and therefore they need to learn English in order to engage with the outer world.	Muslim women are assertive, accomplished and successfully contributing in many spheres of public life.  That Muslim women choose the way they dress or behave	Muslim women need education in English language.  Muslim women are 'traditionally submissive'.  That wearing Hijab make Muslim women less outgoing.	Started with UK but quickly spread to other parts of the globe.	Mainly Muslim women and women showing solidarity from other communities

#refugee	Since most Muslims in the Global North are immigrants some of whom were refugees once or still are, this hashtag got circulated with #traditionalsubmissive	Refugees are and can be as accomplished as any natives.	Refugees need to 'learn' in order to assimilate with the rest. Refugees are culturally inferior to the natives.	Mainly UK and Europe	Muslim women from UK and Europe
#thisislam	This hashtag is regularly used when Muslim practices rooted in Islam are targeted especially in Europe.	To assert the Muslim practices and Islamic identity. To highlight the obligatory nature of practices and enforce a stringent view of it.	Islam and Muslim practices rooted in Islam are backward and inferior in comparison of western practices.  Hijab is a choice as an idea is also subverted by fundamentalist who claim it is rooted in the obligatory aspects of practicing Islam and therefore is not a choice.	Mainly UK and Europe	Muslim women and Muslims in general
#HijabToMe	This hashtag's roots lie in the reassertion of identity by Muslim women in the face of increasing opposition to it by European countries especially France, Germany and the United Kingdom.	Hijab is a practice integral to everyday Muslim culture for many Muslims women.  Adorning Hijab can be fancy and glamorous.  Muslim women are not apologetic about practicing hijab.	Hijab is a form of oppression and subjugation of Muslim women.  Hijab cannot be a choice and is always imposed.  Women who wear Hijab are traditionally submissive.	Globally	Practicing Muslim women

Following is two notable examples of use of #traditionalsubmissive hashtag provide evidence to the fact that this hashtag was used to assert the Muslim identity by women by showcasing that their accomplishments while practicing Hijab, most of whom were traditionally dressed and were using a headgear in various forms (Figure 87).



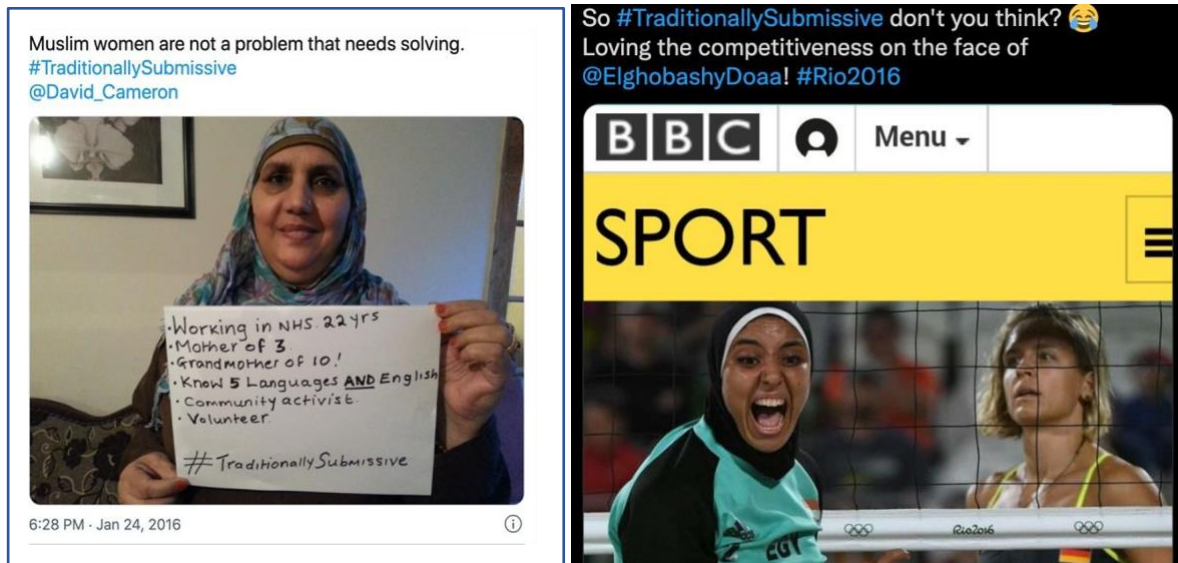


Figure 87: Example of subversion using #TraditionallySubmissive

### Network 9: #HalalHumour Actor Network

#Halalhumour is a popular hashtag using which Muslims share funny ideas, images, memes and jokes about their inner and outer worlds. It has also been found to be used by people to subvert narrow interpretation of Islam and Muslim practices. It has been observed as a hashtag mainly used by Muslims to communicate their everyday 'lived religion' (Ammerman, 2015) ) as opposed to an imagined believer based on the strict textual interpretation especially in the context of narrow and radical interpretation of Islam. Since the practices themselves are diverse and not just based on any one school of Islamic theology and includes indigenous cultures of believers therefore often there is a debate amongst people on schools advocating a very strict code like the Saudi version of Islam (the Hanabali School and its descendant Wahhabiyah) which is strictly against innovations (*Bida'b*) in the practices of the Prophet (Sunnah) (Britannica, 2021) and are quick to declare anyone following any syncretic practices like the *Sufism* as apostates. However, the concept of *Bidah* is not a new one in Islamic history. With the death of Muhammad – the prophet of Islam, these differences started occurring with the changing social context. *Halal* is an Arabic word which means 'permissible'. This word is used in everyday Muslim settings for anything like food, practices, ideas – that human beings indulge in. Therefore, the hashtag #halalhumour is using the term as a pun to mean humour that is permissible in Islam.

The data analysed as part of this research show that Islamic ideas originating from Quran and Hadith, have been used by Muslims to share their everyday cultural practices like singing, dancing, use of technology, attraction to the opposite sex, etc.; in order to simply crack a joke using religious phrases and terminology and generate humour in their everyday settings.

Trying to follow Islam in the best possible way yet failing time and again, is also a major theme in the messages shared using #Halalhumour. Below are two examples of memes shared using #halalhumour on Twitter (Figure 90). First one on the prescribed Islamic behaviour of ‘lowering gaze’ for men when encountering a *non-mahram* woman. And the second one on gelatine – which is considered a haram ingredient by some Muslims in the context of the prescribed Halal food for believers.

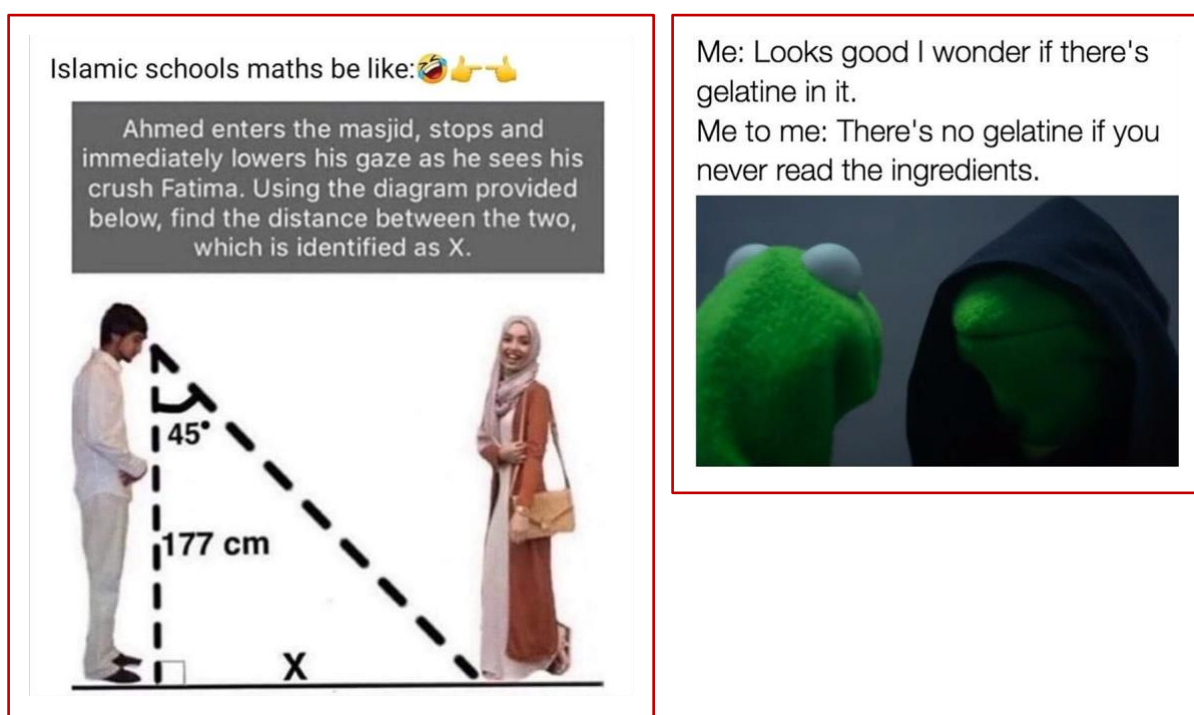


Figure 88: Example of #HalalHumour

The following, Figure 89, is visualising the top 20 geographical locations of #Halalhumour of Twitter users who have Tweeted hashtag #Halalhumour from 2018 until 26 August 2021.

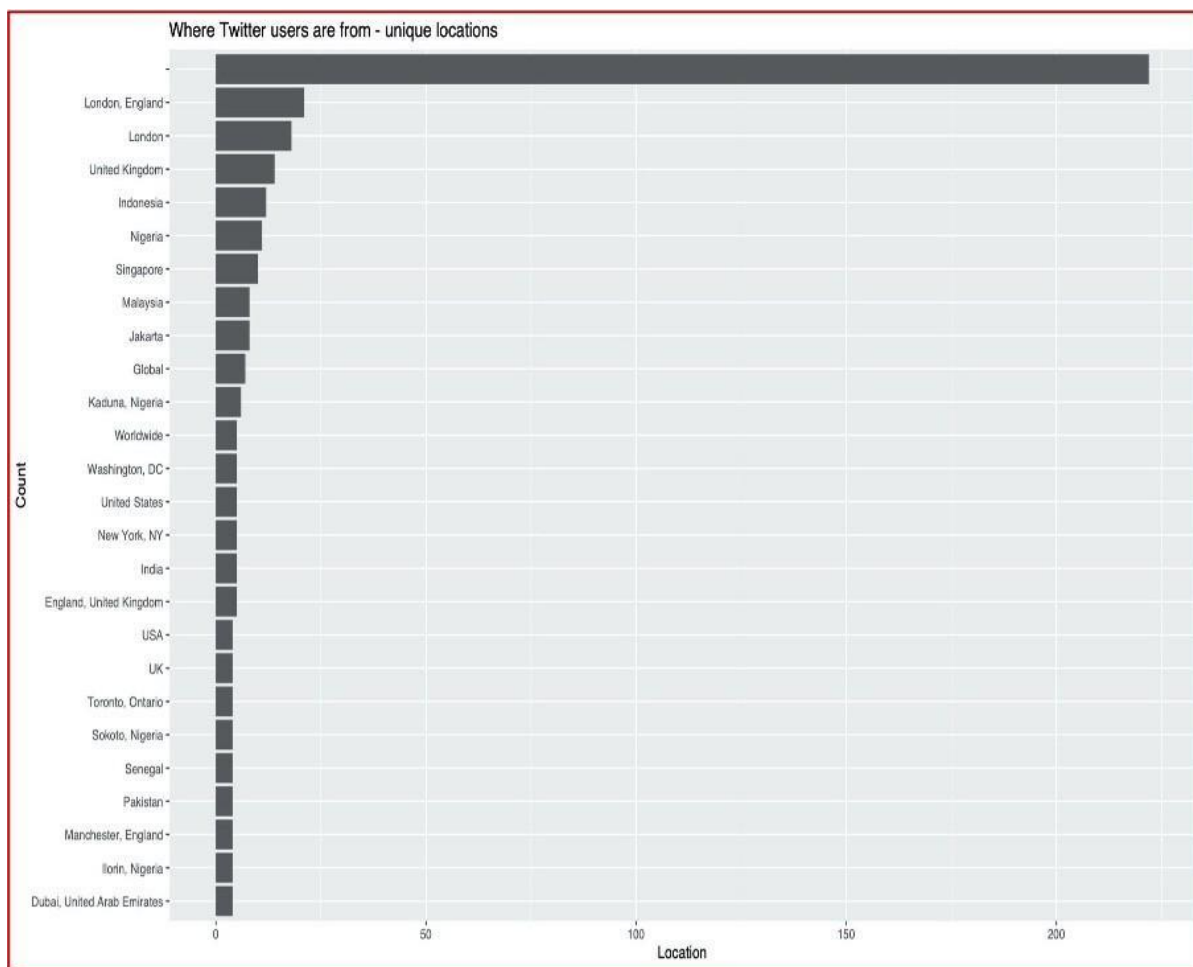


Figure 89: Geographic engagement of #HalalHumour

The above graph clearly shows that most of the users of this hashtag are the ones who have not disclosed their location on Twitter. People do not mention their location for reasons ranging from privacy to anonymity in order to avoid reprisal that might follow owing to their public posts. However, if we look at the findings for the rest of the locations, it can be clearly observed that the population in the western democracies are mainly using this hashtag, starting with the United Kingdom and USA. This can be attributed to better access to technology and democratic rights in these countries. This can perhaps also be attributed to an attack on Muslims from within who choose to negate the fundamental practice as preached by schools like the Salafism and therefore finding an opening in expressing themselves using humour as a subversion as well as relief device (Bakhtin, 1971; Monro, 2010). It would be useful to mention that the narrow ideological interpretation of Islam has also been thriving in the West. However, it is interesting to see Nigeria occupying one of the top positions in this list. Nigerian politics and society have in recent years been battling Boko Haram (literally meaning ‘Westernisation Is Sacrilege’ in Hausa)- a militia group established in 2002, which nurses ambition to bring Nigeria under the Sharia law and has been in conflict with the Nigerian government and Christian institutions since 2009 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). Boko Haram, which since 2015 has identified itself with Islamic State (McKenna,



2021) prominently feature on international discourse on Islam and Muslims, when it kidnapped 275 girls from a school in 2014. Assuming #Halalhumour is used to challenge ideas from within the community and from the dominant religious institutions like the clerics, it can be argued that this is an indication of assertion of Nigerian Muslims in the face of increasing activity of Boko Haram. This data clearly shows that Muslims in Nigeria are choosing to challenge the narrative peddled by Boko Haram. Interestingly, India and Pakistan, together hosting the majority of world's Muslim population, are not proportionally showing the activity around #halalhumour hashtag which can also indicate that the scale of activity on #Halalhumour is not proportional to the number of Muslims in that particular region rather it depends on number of other geo-political factors as well. For example, both Indonesia and Malaysia have seen political activism from parties committed to establish an 'Islamic state' (Liow, 2015) in these countries and the high ranking of these countries in this list can be an indicator of resistance against these attempts towards Islamisation of its political processes.

The following network depict the major actors of #HalalHumour:

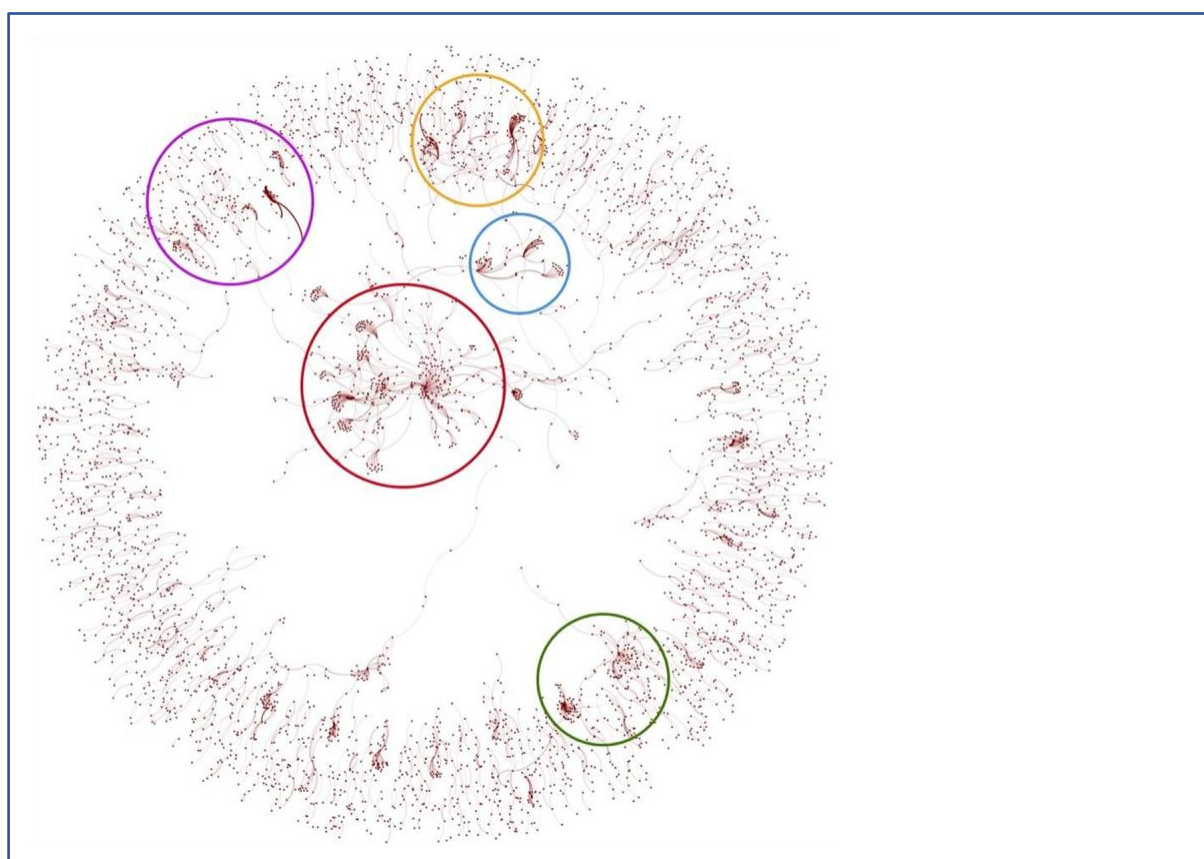


Figure 90: Actor network of #HalalHumour

Table 22: Key users of #HalalHumour

Twitter Handle	User name	Twitter Verified	Following Count	Follower Count	Account's Self-Description	Possible location
@IFANCA (represented by the red circle)	IFANCA	No	315	4, 777	Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (IFANCA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to halal certification and to promoting halal	USA
@MuslimPro (represented by the blue circle)	Muslim Pro Official	No	23	50.3K	Empowering Muslims – Innovating technologies to enrich Islamic way of Life	Global
@sheikhimaan (represented by the Blue circle)	Imaan Sheikh	Yes	18	69.6K	Associate Editor, Toronto	Toronto, Canada
@HalalorHaram (represented by the Violet circle)	Halal or Haram	No	1689	2450	Asif of Halal or Haram & Is It Halal or Haram	England

It is interesting to note that a computer application called *Muslim Pro*, an ‘Islamic lifestyle app’, which aid Muslims lead a ‘halal’ life by intimating them about prayer times, etc., is one of the leading actors in the #Halalhumour hashtag network. In fact, the actor network for #HalalHumour clearly shows that the Halal food industry as well as other commercial products which are originating from aggressive marketing by the Halal product industry as well as the aspiration of many Muslims to live a ‘halal’ life are dominating players in the conversation about Halal-Haram.

The red circle depicts the related activity hub for the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (IFANCA) which is a non-profit organization dedicated to halal certification and to promoting halal, not only is central in the network but also connects to at least three other key players in the network.

## Network 10: #HalalHumour Hashtag Network

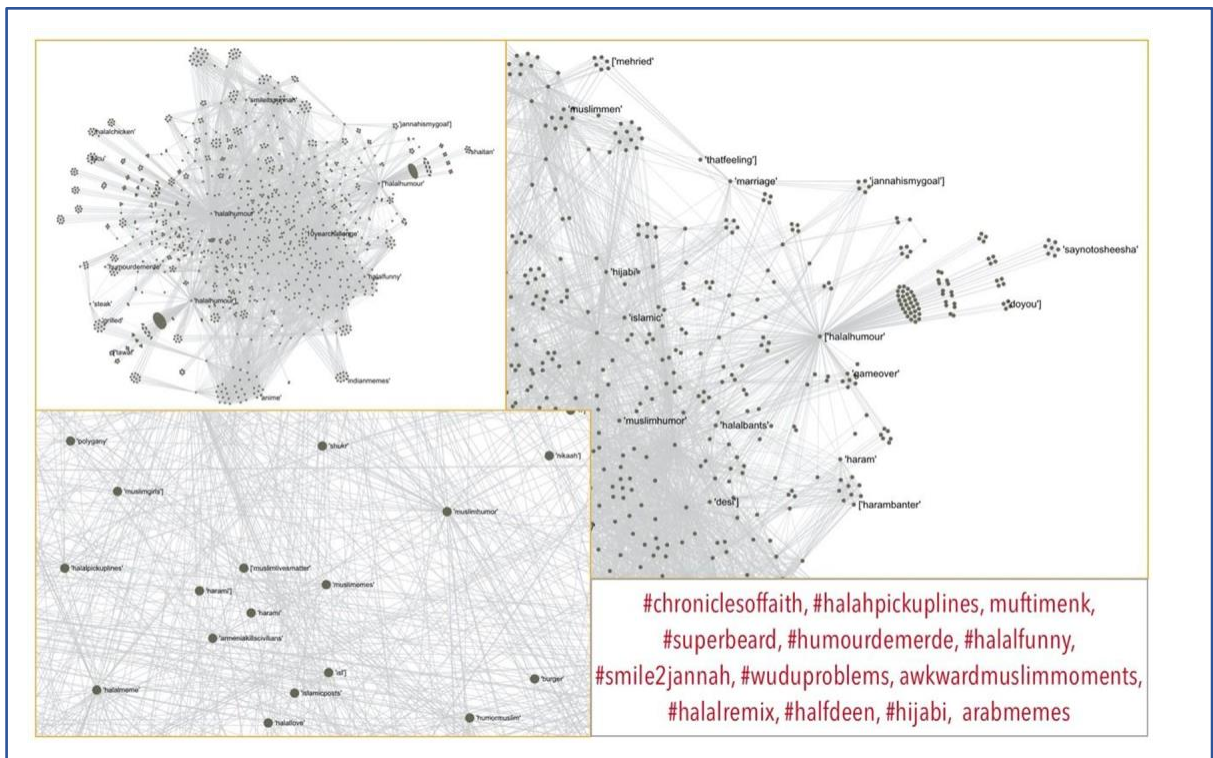


Figure 91: Co-occurring hashtag network with #HalalHumour

The Halal humour co-occurring hashtag network expectedly show activity around humour and halal by employing hashtags like #halalpickupline, #superbeard, #halalfunny, #awkwardmuslimmoments, #arabmemes and #smile2jannah. For example, the following meme was share with a hashtag #halalpickupline using the word play to create humour in everyday settings (Figure 92).



Figure 92: Use of #halalpickuelines

All the co-occurring hashtags corroborate with the thematic analysis conducted for the purpose of this study wherein #Halalhumour hashtag was primarily used in the everyday settings of Muslims often to reinforce practices based on Islam like Hijab and Halal at the same time to also subvert them.

#### 4.2.2. Network Analysis: Conclusion

This chapter presented the key insights gathered from the generated networks based on dominant and subversive hashtag memes. Three pairs of hashtags were chosen.

Dominant meme Hashtag	Subversive meme Hashtag
#ISIS	#OpParis
#Hijab	#TraditionallySubmissive
#Halal	#HalalHumour

The key actors and co-occurring hashtag networks were created for each of these chosen Hashtags. Some of the key actors and co-occurring hashtags that were revealed by the created network were then discussed in light of the nature of their use. The use of dominant hashtags, subverted hashtags as well as revealed co-occurring hashtags were located both in the key actors as well as ordinary users. The examination of patterns that emerged out of these networks are the following:

##### **Concerning the discourse on Islam and Muslims using dominant hashtags:**

- All three variable i.e. events, actors and geographies played an important role in shaping the online discourse on Islam and Muslims.
- One of the dominant hashtags namely ISIS was found to be used as a vessel in the context of at least two political issues having transnational implications – one in Ethiopia and the other in Nigeria – that were not directly linked to ISIS in any way. In both the cases one of the warring parties used the potency of #ISIS in the memetic sphere to shuttle their message to international audience in order to gain attention, build public opinion and subvert the motives of its adversary.

In the Ethiopian case, #TPLF was used with #ISIS by the Ethiopians supporting Abiy Ahmed's Coalition government's military containment of *TPLF* (Tigray People's Liberation Front) as it has been demanding greater autonomy from the federal govt., etc.; in order to build a narrative that TPLF is a terrorist organisation akin to ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabab.

The use of #ISIS in the Nigerian case was set in the context of a long history of conflict for land resources between nomadic Fulani herdsmen (mainly Muslims) and the settled farming communities (mainly Christian). In this case as well a narrative was built to frame Fulani Herdsmen collaborating with ISIS, ISWAP and Boko Haram, in order to attack the farming communities.

In both the cases an attempt is being made to Islamise the conflict which is originally set in demand for – greater political autonomy in case of Ethiopia and greater land resources in case of Nigeria; using #ISIS.

- Hashtag #Halalhumour and #Hijab is widely used with #islamicreminders indicates to the pattern of these hashtags being used to reinforce Islamic traditions in everyday cultural practices using co-occurring hashtags like #Hijab, #Ramadan,#Salat, #Halallifestyle, #CantikHijab.
- The emergence of countries like Indonesia and Malaysia as epicentre of activities on Halal related hashtags show that it is not just the Muslim immigrants living in non-Islamic countries who are using these hashtags because they might not get ready access to and information about Halal certified products and therefore are using these hashtags for this purpose but also countries which have Muslim majority. This could mean that there is a greater aspiration amongst Muslims in these countries to lead a #halallifestyle in all spheres of life and not just food. There were many examples which were cited in support of this claim in the findings above.
- The use of Halal related hashtags show its very strong connection with an economic push and marketing from the Halal products industry which has over the years diversified itself into other spheres of life like Halal cosmetics and Halal investment, besides the Halal food products. However, there is also an aggressive counter push by the non-halal meat industry and animal welfare activists across many parts of the world.
- The scale of memetic activity on #Halalhumour is not directly proportional to the number of Muslims in that particular region rather it depends on number of other geo-political factors as well because Pakistan and India, which together house the majority of the muslim population of the world, do not rank very high in using #Halalhumour. This could also be telling of their

access to economic-technological opportunities in these countries which are necessary tools of digital engagement.

### **Concerning the Network:**

- It has clearly emerged from the networks that players with as little as two followers can also have a significant role to play in the network (see #ISIS Actor Network 1). This finding also demonstrates the usability of this method itself which can reveal hidden dynamics in way that, perhaps, other methods won't be able to. The networks showed that not only actors with high followers wield power in the memetic sphere but also those actors which are situated in the network at a strategic position there by acting as a bridge between important hubs in the network.
- All the networks that were created confirmed the power law (Barabasi, 2012, 2016) or in simple terms formed hubs around which most actors converged. Every network visibly confirmed that there were only very few critical actors who are shaping the discourse on the subject. For example, Tarek Fatah (#ISIS), CtrlSec (#OpParis), Hnd Army (#traditionallysubmissive) and Hindu Jagran Org (#boycotthalal).

## 5. Conclusion

The conclusion to this work is divided into five parts, out of which the first three are the areas to which this study contributes, namely: the Memetic Studies, the Medium Studies, and the Everyday Digital Practices in the realm of Cultural Studies.

1. The Memetics
2. The Medium: The Internet meme
3. The Patterns in the Digital Discourse on Islam and Muslims: Everyday Digital Practices
4. Concluding Remarks with respect to the two Research Questions
5. Limitations

### The Memetics

*What lies at the heart of every living thing is not a fire, not warm breath, not a 'spark of life.' It is information, words, instructions... If you want to understand life, don't think about vibrant, throbbing gels and ooze, think about information technology.*

Richard Dawkins, 1986

Sixty-four thousand years ago, some of our ancestors, standing in a secluded cave, used their hands as stencils to make their marks on the rocks. What were their intentions? We have no idea. But we know for sure that they were there when we look at the red, hand stencil prints in the Maltravieso Cave, Cáceres, Spain. Looking at the starry night sky makes some of us wonder about the beauty of cosmic creations. Some of the distant dwindling lights come from stars, which we can see, but they have long been gone. We know of their presence by the signal that they transmitted billions of years ago in the form of light. The handprint and the light are the vessels through which the information about our ancestor or a distant star has travelled to us. They are information packets, and what we make of these packets entirely depends on us.

This work's findings resonate with Dawkins' (1976) viewpoint and that of many other thinkers, for instance, Jacques Monod, Roger Sperry, and Daniel Dennett, for whom the information model of the universe is critical in developing our understanding of the events and processes around us.

In the context of this work, the researcher has adopted the information or idea viewpoint to develop a comprehensive understanding of the process of subversion in communication. The information viewpoint was further formalised under the memetic concept, which was proposed by Dawkins (1976). Although information, as a concept, is complex and elusive, it is amenable to mathematical and descriptive formalism (Glattfelder, 2019). Many scholars see information as one



of the principal candidates to study when considering the foundation of communication processes. An eminent physicist, John Wheeler, was one of the first to realise and support this argument. Quoting Davies, 2014, p. 95:

*An alternative view is gaining in popularity: a view in which information is regarded as the primary entity from which physical reality is built.*

As information, communication is also an elusive and complex construct, and has more profound ramifications. Information alongside the right communication approach can do wonders, or it may result in destruction (MacBride, 2003). Considering these facts, it becomes critical to develop new frameworks and perspectives to understand the different flavours of information and communication. This research was an attempt in this direction, as the researcher chose to analyse the patterns of subversion in the process of communication. The researcher believes that subversion(s) plays a critical role in today's connected world, and it can affect geopolitics, and both the national and regional balance, together with society's overall well-being. Furthermore, adding the fabric of religion and belief makes the social dynamics more sensitive to the information and communication instruments, and therefore, this work was set up in the area of religion.

In summary, this work is partly a pragmatic and *de novo* attempt to understand the patterns of subversion in the context of communications related to religion and beliefs in a society under an information paradigm. The *de novo* part of the attempt is contributed using memetic theory and network analysis, to study the spread of ideas.

The primary conclusions in relation to the patterns that are exhibited by the internet hashtag memes are:

1. The network analysis provided rich evidence of memetic activity, namely: replication, mutation, transmission, and longevity in the hashtags of memes, in terms of their creation, diversity, circulation, and success over the years. The patterns, therefore, indicate strong evidence of the usefulness of the gene-meme analogy (Dawkins, 1976), which lies at the heart of the memetic theoretical paradigm in understanding the memetic behaviour of internet memes.

2. The networks generated by the memetic activity displayed a preferential attachment attribute (Barabasi, 2013, 2016), meaning that it formed memetic hubs that are centred around a few key hashtags, which effectively means only a few hashtags that come from a large pool of the hashtags dominate and survive, and that have displayed virality, in terms of circulation, as well as by creating other mutated offspring.
3. Each of the meme families that were analysed in the thematic section (*Ordinary Muslim Man*, *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix*, *Condescending Wonka/Creepy Wonka*, and *Woman Yelling at a Cat*), which have hundreds of their variants in the memesphere, displayed evidence of replication, mutation, transmission, and longevity (Dawkins, 1976).

### **The Medium: Internet memes**

The history and enquiry into the field of communication has also been about enquiry into the very nature of the media. Harold Innis's *Bias of Communication* (1951) and Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964), was in some sense, a beginning of this enquiry into the very nature of the medium. This research has also shed some light on the nature of internet memes, and the opportunities it provides for the message to take shape in creatively diverse and accessible ways.

The first contribution of this work in studying internet memes as instruments of communication has been in terms of expanding the very definition of internet memes. There have been many studies in the recent past on the phenomenon of Twitter Hashtags and how they have been employed in social and political contexts. However, this researcher has not come across any work which envisaged Twitter hashtags as internet memes. In other words, this research conceptualised hashtags as self-contained idea units, and in doing so, it treats them as a complete message instead of just a vessel to carry other ideas for which they were originally designed. The data gathered and analysed for this research clearly shows that 'hashtag memes' are potent means to engender novel ideas into the public sphere. Because they are short, precise, and highly visible on Twitterverse due to the way Twitter has been designed, trending hashtags are always displayed most prominently on the Twitter's user interface.

Apropos internet memes as artefacts containing visual and text, and rich transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006, 2019) has clearly emerged as a defining feature of most of the visual internet memes, as the visual elements of the memes not only came from popular cultural products, like the

Hollywood classics (e.g., *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *Titanic* and *Spider Man*), from Video games (e.g., *Flappy Bird*), from Classical Literature (e.g., *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*), from Popular American TV shows (e.g., *Friends* and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*), but also from user-created media, as in the case of the *Ordinary Muslim Man*, *ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix*, *Inshallah* and *Bismillah* memes.

The internet memes have also been identified as sites in which ‘Trash Culture’ (Simon, 1999; Pye, 2011), which uses everyday material products to produce artefacts, thrives. There is very strong evidence to suggest that Internet memes, as vehicles of communication, provide fertile ground on which the aesthetics of trash flourish.

### **Patterns in Digital Discourse on Islam and Muslims: Everyday Digital Practices**

The internet memes, including hashtags, provided evidence of everyday resistance and subversion by ordinary individuals, who employed the symbols from the popular culture as well as created their own unique and original language to subvert and resist discourse about and on Islam and Muslims. The digital practices concurred with the works of champions like Michel de Certeau, Stuart Hall and James C Scott whose work focused on the concept of Everyday within the realm of Cultural Studies, in the sense of co-existing with the dominant institutions and not coming in direct conflict with them, yet creating and exploiting fissures in those structures to resist in their little ways. The study also attests to the use of humour in functioning as a tool of resistance and perhaps relief in line with Michele Bakhtin’s ideas.

Both the network and thematic analysis indicate the importance of the events, geography, and actors in shaping discursive practices, as well as their roles as intervening phenomenological variables that give the memes their liveness, discursivity and meaning.

‘Everyday Life and Lived Religion’ has emerged as an important and major theme in the work. However, the major conversation around Islam and Muslims was engendered by popular events and organisations, and thus ‘Terrorism, Security and Surveillance’ emerged as the second major theme in the study. The data suggests that terrorist organisations, like the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), perennially dominated the memosphere, due to their activities worldwide that are carried out via regional offshoots.

#ISIS was found to be used as a vessel in the context of at least two political issues that have transnational implications – one in Ethiopia, and the other in Nigeria – that were not directly linked

to ISIS in any way. The potency of *#ISIS* in the memetic sphere was employed in order to transmit messages to the international audience so as to gain attention, build public opinion, and subvert the motives of its adversaries. In both cases, an attempt was being made to Islamise a conflict which originally started to demand greater political autonomy in the case of Ethiopia, and greater land resources in the case of Nigeria, by using *#ISIS*.

Indonesia and Malaysia, two countries with Muslim majorities, emerged as the epicentres of discursive practices on the Halal lifestyle, which has been articulated by using hashtags like *#halalfood*, *#halalinvestments*, *#halallifestyle*, *#islamicreminders*, *#halalindonesia*, *#halalovers*, and *#halalisforeveryone*, thus suggesting both interest and mindfulness about their religious identities, as well as an aspiration to perfect their religious practices by applying the halal concept in all spheres of their lives.

The use of Halal related hashtags show that it has a very strong connection with an economic push and marketing, that comes from the Halal products industry, which has over the years diversified itself into other spheres of life, for instance, Halal cosmetics and Halal investment, alongside the Halal food products. However, there is also an aggressive subversion/counter push from the non-Halal meat industry and animal welfare activists across many parts of the world, that use hashtags such as *#BanHalal*, *#BoycottHalal*, and *#Halalscam*.

Both thematic and network analysis suggest the use of internet memes to promote and reinforce practices that are rooted in Islam, like Halal and Hijab, in the everyday cultural practices of Muslims, who use co-occurring hashtags, such as *#islamicreminders*, *#Hijab*, *#Ramadan*, *#Salat*, *#Halallifestyle*, *#CantikHijab*, *#ThisIsIslam* and *#HijabIsObligatory* to share the creative memes rooted in their everyday life.

There is strong evidence to indicate that Muslim women from diverse geographies and backgrounds have used internet memes to assert and defend their Muslim identities and practices and, in the process, have subverted the dominant narratives which perceive them as being subjugated and oppressed by engendering an enabling discourse using hashtags such as *#TraditionallySubmissive*, and *#HandsOffMyHijab*.

There was also clear evidence, in the internet memes and Tweets that were shared with selected hashtags like the *#HalalHumour*, to suggest that humour was a part of the 'ways of operating' (de Certeau, 2011) apparatus in the armour of the memes' creators and users, who creatively and effectively employed it to subvert dominant tropes from within and without muslim communities. There was also substantial evidence in the internet memes to suggest the normalisation of

surveillance amongst Muslims, as well as the use of humour as a device that is employed for ‘relief’, and in the fissures in otherwise constrained environments (Bakhtin, 1971; Monro, 2010).

The hashtag *#HalalHumour* was also found to be used for subverting fundamentalist and puritan ideologies within Islam from Muslims (for instance resisting the Salafi movement) by use of humour through creative constructions, like the ‘*Halal-Haram ratio*’ and *#Harammemes*, which were widely used with hashtag *#HalalHumour*, that represent the everyday negotiation of ordinary Muslims with theology.

Here, I present my concluding observations on the two research questions that were posed in order to fulfil the study's objectives.

**RQ 1.** If and how internet memes are subversive in the context of Islam and Muslims?

Yes, internet memes in the context of Islam and Muslims provide evidence of subversion. The choice of network analysis as a methodological approach, through which studying the forms of subversion proved to be enriching, providing fresh insights from the sea of data that was gathered from the Twitter platform. In the Twitter ecosystem, different ideas, or meme units, interact while using a set of rules. This structure renders itself naturally for network analysis. The consequent network analysis resulted in the identification of critical nodes that trigger the formation of communities, and influence the course and spread of ideas on the network, eventually leading to opinion formation (Segev et al., 2015). Putting these crucial nodes into the memetic framework produced some exciting insights into the mechanism of subversion. To exemplify this observation, the researcher here uses the case of *#Hijab*, which is a predominant idea unit or meme in Islamic digital practices. By following Dawkins’ (1976) proposition, as a meme, this dominant idea was expected to exhibit transmission and mutation behaviour. The most frequent co- occurring hashtags, which are identified in the formation of the co-occurring hashtag network, presented varied opinions on *#Hijab*, which were created using the core idea of the *Hijab* and yet made changes to it. These variations of the hashtag meme *#Hijab* are those mutations that result in different traits, expressions, or opinions. Some see it as a sacred practice, and express it by using *#HijabIsObligatory*, while some call for a *#HijabBan*, because they see it as a form of discrimination. Others express it as a tool of terrorism, in the form of *#passiveterrorism*, and yet others use it to assert their religious identity, *#HandsOffMyHijab*, and see this as an expression of their womanhood, articulating it by creating and using *#Hijabfashion*. There are many similar *#Hijab* offspring. The concepts that have been identified as being subversive were further isolated, and were studied separately using their networks to gain insights into the spread, and mutation of those concepts. The analysis of the subversive meme,

*#TraditionallySubmissive*, in response to *#Hijab*, is one such case that has been investigated in this work.

One way to understand subversion is through the mutation in the meme. Along with the original meme, they spread through the network. Hence, network analysis, coupled with the memetic framework, can identify different forms of subversion and the dynamics of its spread. These insights are critical in the area of geopolitics, societal wellbeing and security. Another insight that was generated through undertaking memetic network analysis was that the success of an actor in a memetic network does not always depend on the number of followers s/he has. This insight was gained when one of the actors in the *#ISIS* network had as few as two followers but exercised an important role in the information network.

**RQ 2.** What is the nature of the interaction among the various elements (image, text, and context) of the internet memes on Islam and Muslims?

As regards this question, nature as has been observed in the memes studied in this research, is highly memetic and trans-medial in terms of form, that quickly adapts old ideas to new settings. In terms of motivations and content, these are not just topical, based on popular ideas whose agenda is often set by the mainstream actors, but they are also situated in the everyday and regular contexts of Muslims who are using it simply to share and express their everyday lived experience, as well as to subvert the dominant mainstream agenda by employing the ‘everyday’ as a tool of subversion, in order to challenge the myths and stereotypes about them. The use of humour as a tactical device, affording resistance and subversion away from the traditional sense of challenging the authority, has also emerged as an important character of the internet memes. The use of humour imparted a high entertainment value to the internet memes on Islam and Muslims, which can be seen as one of the important factors in their popularity or success in the network.

## 5.1. Limitations

Enlisted below are a few challenges and limitations that were faced while conducting this research:

- The limitations of data: The data collection from Twitter API has rate and time limitations. The query using the keywords returns Tweets from the last seven days. It cannot go beyond that time limit. Some programmatic methods are available, which were tried in the study. However, the researcher is not a professional programmer, hence she could only exploit them to a limited extent. But, still, the limit on the temporal and volume extent of the data may have affected the scope of network analysis.
- Any study which is entirely based on secondary data is handicapped by the data authenticity issues. Since the data in terms of the internet memes were collected from the Twitter, the identity and location of users, except the user accounts of public interest, which are officially verified by Twitter indicated by a blue badge authenticating their status, is not verifiable. Therefore, the researcher had to solely rely on the self-declared identification in terms of the names, nationality, and current location of the users. Obviously, some users might change their identity owing to fears of persecution from their own or foreign governments. At the same time, some might have a devious agenda in masking their real identity in order to mislead. The researcher had no way to ascertain this.



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