

## Perceiving Protest Through Memes: Multidimensional Influence of Memes in the Dynamic of Student Protest in Bangladeshi Context: A Thematic Analysis and Survey

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### Abstract:

This study examines the influence of memes on the dynamic of the 2024 student protest in Bangladesh. This research aims to understand how themes of memes can contribute to large-scale participation and sustained involvement in a movement. An inductive thematic analysis was utilized using 30 pro-movement memes circulated on Facebook during the protest timeline, which was complemented by survey data from 80 participants who were actively involved in the protest. It was found that the memes had five key themes that were pivotal in mobilizing and sustaining student participation. This study concludes that the memes demonstrated their effectiveness in the dynamic of this social movement.

**Key Words:** Memes, Student Movement, Bangladesh, Protest Dynamics

### Introduction

Initially, the meaning of the term *meme* was a mind-infecting virus (Richard Dawkins, 1979). However, in the digital context, the definition of meme has evolved. *Memes* are now widely known as typically humorous or satirical pictures which are quickly and easily reproduced, edited, and shared especially on social media sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Shifman, 2013). In the last decade, it has been observed worldwide that memes empower people to unitedly express their criticism and stand against any injustice committed by authoritarian figures which according to Bayerl and Stoykov is a situation when playfulness turns to deadly purpose (2016). Bangladesh is not an exception as the usage of

memes to fuel the student's road safety movement was seen in 2018 (Dyuti, 2020). On 1 July 2024, another student protest broke out in Bangladesh to reform the discriminatory government job quota system which turned into a nationwide anti-government protest when students were attacked and killed by a wing of the governing party, police, and paramilitary forces deployed by the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Hasnat and Martínez, 2024). Until Sheikh Hasina resigned on August 5, 2024, students were unitedly resilient in their demand for justice amidst the large number of arrests, injuries, and deaths in the movement. During the protest, pro-student movement memes were widespread and circulated among students,

especially on Facebook. Even though memes are becoming increasingly recognized as effective instruments for political mobilization and social commentary, little is known about how they specifically influence the dynamics of protest movements, especially in Bangladesh. The hypothesis is that the recurring patterns or themes found in the memes have significantly contributed to the large-scale participation in the movement along with the sustained resilience of students during the protest. This study aims to understand the role memes played in shaping the dynamics of this historical movement.

### ***Research Questions:***

- What were the recurring patterns or themes in the memes which were circulating among students during the 2024 student protest in Bangladesh?
- How can different themes of pro-movement memes impact the overall dynamic and outcome of a protest?
- What is the perspective of the protestors about the influence of the memes in their participation in the protest?
- Can memes contribute to the community spirit in social movements?

### **Research Methodology:**

#### ***Research Design:***

This study employed an inductive thematic analysis of the Facebook memes that were circulated among Bangladesh students during the July-August student protest. This analysis was complemented by the survey approach to determine the influence of those memes on the overall dynamics of the protest.

#### ***Study Corpus:***

A total of 30 pro-student movement memes were collected from 15 July to 5 August, the peak duration of the. Memes were chosen randomly on

Facebook from pages such as but not limited to “Rantages” and “Oi Mama Na Pls”, two Facebook pages that gained popularity among the student community during the protest.

#### ***Research Instruments:***

A survey composed of 6 statements with 5-point Likert scales, was subjected to evaluation by 80 participants. The statements were made to understand the influence of memes in participation, information sharing, creating awareness, conveying protest goals, student unity, and overall outcome.

#### ***Research Participants:***

Research participants were taken randomly from Facebook groups of Bangladeshi undergrad students who actively participated in the protest online or offline.

#### ***Data Analysis:***

The analysis of the memes started with the inductive thematic analysis using a 6-phased thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke, this approach ensures organized systematic analysis that helps to construct a narrative around the data (2012). Hence, this method can aid in finding patterns and understanding the context of the memes. After the initial familiarization process, 30 memes underwent assessment and each of those were labeled with a phrase that narrated the meme’s goal and contextual latent meaning. Then the labels were manually analyzed and shortened into small codes that only included the key point of the label for maintaining the accuracy of later organization. Then the codes were organized in groups based on similar patterns. Next, a detailed analysis was done to determine the final organization of the codes and developing themes. Additionally, frequency distribution was utilized to summarize the findings of the thematic analysis and the data from the Google Form survey.

#### **Findings and Discussion:**

The thematic analysis of the 30 selected memes revealed five key themes (Table 1).

**Table 1 Classification and recurrence of themes**

Themes	Criticism and Mockery of Authority	Call for Action	Inspiration for Resilience	Local Trends and Historical Reference	Memes as Coping Mechanism
Recurrence	11	8	6	6	4
codes	Criticizing Legislation, Criticizing Government, Mocking Government, Mocking Prime Minister, Mocking Police	Call for Unity, Call for Solidarity, Call for Participation	Empowerment, Hope, Motivation	Trend, History	Expressing frustration, Expressing Grief

The most prominent theme was criticism and mockery of authority. This included direct criticism of the government, legislation, and law enforcement, as well as satire aimed at the police force and political figures such as the contemporary Prime Minister, as shown in the table. For instance, figure 1 is a meme mocking and criticizing the government's actions to repress the protest. This type of meme may have empowered students to voice against perceived injustices (Penney, 2020).

Call for action was found as the second most recurred theme. Memes under this theme directly and indirectly encouraged participation in the protest by calling for unity, solidarity, and collective action (Table 1). For example, the meme in Figure 2 called for unity and solidarity among people from all religions to join the protest. Besides, the survey results in this study reveal that memes directly influenced students to participate in the protest which aligns with this theme.



Figure 1  
Meme #22



Figure 2 Meme #15

Local trends and historical references, Inspiration for resilience both were next in popularity. Both of these themes were found separately in a few instances, but Figure 3 contains an example of both of these themes together in one meme where the hope of the alleged autocratic contemporary prime minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation in August 2024 is expressed with a comparison reference to the military coup of 15 August 1975 when Sheikh Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government was overthrown, which was assumed to be an effect of his restoration of one-party dictatorship and totalitarian control (Maniruzzaman, 1976, p. 119). empowerment, hope, and motivation were included under the umbrella of Inspiration for resilience because these had similar patterns in the lens of creating emotional support and a sense of resilience which may have encouraged students to persist in their activism even when confronted with setbacks or

repression. However, the local trends and historical reference themes included memes reflecting historical references and current trends in Bangladesh. Historical reference and current trends have been merged under one theme because understanding the significance of both types of memes requires a deeper understanding and familiarity with that particular context, which promotes a nation-specific narrative. This narrative may have built a sense of shared identity among the protestors promoting solidarity.

Few memes had an expression of grief about deaths in the protest and frustration about the government. These types of memes may have helped the protestors to cope with their emotion as a psychological lifesaver (Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021). However, the sensitivity of topics like death (Figure 4) may be the reason for the lowest circulation of this theme.



Figure 3

Meme #7 Figure 4



Meme #30

The survey data (figure 5) provides compelling evidence supporting the hypothesis that the recurring patterns or themes found in the memes have significantly contributed to the large-scale participation in the student movement, as well as the sustained resilience of the students during the protest. A substantial proportion of respondents

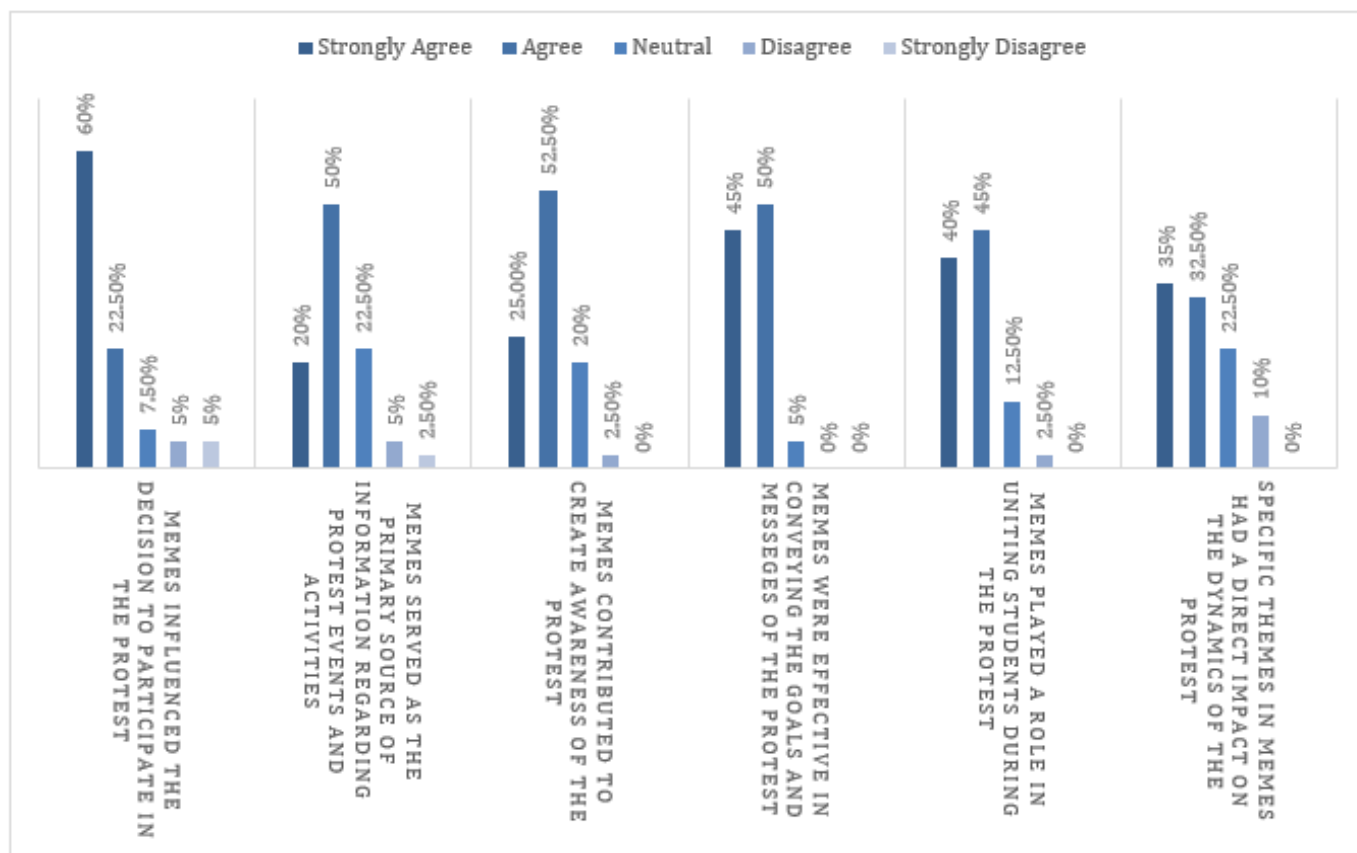
consistently agree with the hypothesis, with the majority falling under the "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" categories across all items. Specifically, the percentage of respondents who "Strongly Agree" ranges from 20% to 60%, while those who "Agree" range from 22.50% to 52.50%, indicating a strong consensus regarding the influential role of



memes. Conversely, the percentage of respondents who are "Neutral" or express disagreement ("Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree") remains

notably low, further underscoring the positive reception and perceived impact of these meme patterns in the context of the protest.

Figure 5 Overview of the survey



**Conclusion:**

The findings of this study support the hypothesis by suggesting that the recurring patterns or themes found in memes significantly contributed to the large-scale participation and sustained resilience of students throughout the 2024 student protests in Bangladesh. Prominent themes of Pro-movement memes such as criticism and mockery of authority and calls for action, directly influenced students' participation and sustained their involvement in the protest despite facing severe repression. Furthermore, the themes of local trends and historical references, and inspiration for resilience contributed to creating a sense of shared identity and community among protestors which reinforced the collective struggle to demand justice against all repression and difficulties. Moreover, memes aided the students in dealing with mental stresses by expressing their feelings which is portrayed by the

theme, memes as coping mechanism. Additionally, the positive response of the participants under the various themes portrays the significant impact of memes on the dynamics of the protest. The survey reveals that memes influenced the student's decision to participate, highlighting the power of memes as motivational tools, particularly among younger populations active on social media. While memes were impactful, they were a complement to traditional sources of information. Nonetheless, memes proved effective in spreading awareness about the protest's key messages and goals, as well as in mobilizing participants by providing timely information about ongoing and upcoming protest activities. So this research leads to the conclusion that memes can play a vital role in creating a sense of shared identity and solidarity among the youth by fostering a community spirit which is important to the success of any movement.

### Limitations:

The meme analysis was the major factor in this study and other factors which may have impacted the movement are not taken into consideration in this research. Additionally, it is possible that the sample size of survey takers did not accurately reflect the range of viewpoints and experiences gained by all movement members.

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