


## Memes as Political Discourse: A Semiotic Analysis of Palestine-Israeli Conflict

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i4.1015>

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### A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore how Instagram memes related to the Palestine-Israeli conflict convey political narratives through both denotative and connotative meanings. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, a descriptive qualitative method was employed to analyse 60 memes tagged with #Palestinememes and #Israelmemes. The analysis focused on the interaction between visual and textual elements and their role in constructing meaning. The findings reveal nine dominant themes, including state delegitimisation, opponent dehumanisation, and media propaganda. Denotation provides literal anchors, while connotation embeds ideological stances, such as the keffiyeh symbolising Palestinian identity or the Star of David representing Israeli statehood. The results indicate that memes serve as condensed political texts, allowing users to share emotionally impactful messages that shape public perceptions. The study highlights the role of memes in digital agenda-setting and emphasises the necessity of critical media literacy when engaging with political content on multimodal platforms.

**Keywords:** *Semiotic Analysis, Political Discourse, Instagram Memes, Palestine-Israel Conflict.*

#### Article History:

Received 07<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Accepted 28<sup>th</sup> July 2025

Published 06<sup>th</sup> August 2025



## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media has evolved into a central arena for political engagement and civic discourse. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (X), and TikTok are not merely used for personal expression but have become influential tools for shaping public opinion, mobilising activism, and disseminating ideological narratives (Makatlal & Kumar, 2022; Rachimoellah et al., 2024). The accessibility and virality of these platforms enable users to participate in global conversations about justice, resistance, and identity beyond the boundaries of traditional media. Among the many formats used in this space, internet memes have emerged as powerful tools for symbolic communication, blending humour, satire, and visual rhetoric to convey political stances in simplified yet impactful ways (AlAfnan, 2025). One of the notable examples of this digital phenomenon, "memes", is the intense public engagement with the Israel-Palestine conflict across online platforms, which has given rise to digital activism, symbolic protest, and deepening ideological polarisation.

The concept of meme, introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) as a unit of cultural transmission, has undergone a profound transformation in the digital era (Beskow et al., 2020; Shifman, 2013). Initially understood as ideas replicated through imitation, memes have evolved into multimodal digital artefacts—often combining images, symbols, and textual elements—circulated rapidly through participatory media. Shifman redefines internet memes as groups of digital items that share content, form, and stance, and that are created with

awareness of each other. In this context, memes function not only as entertainment but also as rhetorical devices capable of framing sociopolitical discourse, expressing resistance, and shaping public sentiment (AlAfnan, 2025; Marian-arnat, 2023).

As digital media becomes an integral part of political life, memes have increasingly been employed as tools of critique and ideological contestation. Political memes operate through irony, exaggeration, intertextuality, and symbolism to challenge authority, question dominant narratives, or promote solidarity (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Leiser, 2022). Their multimodal nature allows for the compression of complex ideas into short, shareable formats that are easily consumed and disseminated. As such, memes serve as more than cultural reflections; they become instruments of meaning-making and agenda-setting digital political communication (Abid et al., 2024).

This transformation is particularly salient in the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict. As one of the most protracted and symbolically charged geopolitical disputes in modern history (Gherardini, 2024), it has generated massive engagement on social media, particularly Instagram. Users frequently create and distribute memes that frame the conflict from moral, ideological, or humanitarian perspectives, often through familiar formats such as "Drakeposting," "SpongeBob," or "Bernie Sanders." These memes are tagged with hashtags like #Palestinememes and #Israelmemes, functioning as digital repositories of competing narratives. I argue that, in order to attend to the emergent implications of memes and consider their differentiations from other pop-cultural phenomena, we need to unpack the spatial logic through which memes emerge and circulate (Baspehlivan, 2023).

To understand how such visual discourse operates, this study adopts the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes (1977), a foundational theorist in the study of sign systems and cultural meaning. Barthes conceptualises signs as the combination of signifier (form) and signified (concept), and distinguishes between two levels of meaning: denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associated ideological or emotional meanings (Bouzida, 2014). His work further introduces the idea of myth – how connotations are naturalised as commonsense truths within specific cultures. Applying Barthes' denotative-connotative model reveals how memes construct layered meanings that evoke shared emotional and cultural associations (connotation) about the Palestine-Israel conflict, demonstrating their role as tools of affective persuasion – largely operated through connotative meanings – in digital discourse. While Barthes' concept of 'myth' (the naturalisation of connotations) is acknowledged, the core semiotic analysis in this study focuses on deconstructing the denotative and connotative levels.

Denotation refers to what is visually presented: the people, objects, or words explicitly shown in an image. Connotation, meanwhile, involves the ideological, emotional, or cultural meanings that these signs evoke (Bouzida, 2014; Rahmawati, 2024). For instance, a meme depicting a crying child in Gaza may denote a child in distress, but connotatively signals injustice, powerlessness, or calls for humanitarian concern. In political memes, connotative meaning plays a central role in influencing how audiences interpret conflict narratives. Through combinations of familiar templates, sarcastic captions, and emotionally charged visuals, these memes communicate layered meanings that often resonate with or challenge prevailing ideologies (Samreen, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Thus, Barthes' model is particularly suited for unpacking how visual media like memes mediate complex sociopolitical discourse.

Research on memes as a medium for political discourse has grown significantly, particularly in the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Memes related to the Israel–Palestine conflict are widely circulated across various social media platforms, thereby enhancing democratic participation by making it more relatable, tangible, and accessible to diverse audiences (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Johann, 2022). This meme functions both as entertainment and as a tool to undermine certain parties while raising global awareness through humour (Puspa Melati et al., 2022).

Another study concluded that memes functioned as tools of digital activism that reinforced pro-Palestinian narratives, especially among younger audience (Zidani, 2021). While this research highlighted message distribution and user engagement, it did not delve

deeply into the semiotic structure of meaning-making. In other words, the rhetorical and sociopolitical functions of memes have been explored, but the ways in which visual signs shape perception at the semiotic level remain underexamined.

Recent studies have focused on using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze memes. For example, Samreen (2024) examined denotative and connotative meanings in internet memes, showing that they often challenge or reinforce cultural beliefs by relying on shared cultural knowledge to convey their messages effectively. Similarly, Rahmawati (2024) focused on Twitter memes, particularly those related to everyday social life, analyzing how meaning is constructed through denotation and connotation. Additional studies have centered on more general or culturally specific themes (Cindy, 2016; Ira et al., 2025; Isnaniah & Agustina, 2020; Prabu et al., 2025). While collectively these works demonstrate the strength of Barthes' framework in interpreting sociopolitical messages embedded in memes, most analyses have remained within relatively common or localized topics, such as pandemic-related discourse or online subcultures.

This study seeks to extend the use of Barthes' semiotic approach by turning its focus toward memes related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Circulating widely across digital platforms, these memes present complex visual narratives involving political delegitimation, resistance, and humanitarian concerns. As such, they offer a significant opportunity to apply and expand semiotic theory within the context of international conflict discourse.

Theoretically, this study contributes to media linguistics by investigating how multimodality – the interaction between visual and verbal signs – shapes political narratives in digital environments. Here, memes are not treated merely as humorous expressions but as complex semiotic systems strategically used to frame ideology and identity.

Practically, the study carries contextual relevance for regions such as Indonesia and Southeast Asia, where digital engagement with the Palestine issue is particularly high. By uncovering how memes convey meaning through powerful symbolic associations, this research offers insights that support the development of critical media literacy, especially among younger users navigating ideological and potentially polarising content on social media platforms.

As a protracted conflict with complex historical, political, and religious roots, the Israel-Palestine issue generates intensely fragmented and emotional narratives. This study acknowledges that the analysed memes may contain traumatic content, symbolic violence, or dehumanisation. The semiotic analysis conducted here treats memes as communication phenomena, not political endorsements. The scholarly purpose is to reveal how meaning forms through meme multimodality, a position maintained through methodological discipline (semiotic bracketing) and peer debriefing.

## METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to understand political communication phenomena in their natural context, with an emphasis on presenting data narratively (Rahman, 2017). This methodology prioritises the interpretation of non-numerical data – including texts, images, speech, and actions – to uncover nuanced social realities (Flick, 2022). The analysis focuses on digital memes as multimodal texts, using a semiotic approach to uncover both denotative and connotative meanings (Rose, 2019; Shifman, 2013).

The primary data, using a qualitative approach, according to Creswell, can be in the form of texts, pictures, or documents, which can be found in participants' experiences or in social contexts (Ishtiaq, 2019). The data in this study are 60 Palestinian-Israeli memes representing the conflict situation between the two countries, and were posted on Instagram. The data was collected using a hashtag search method on Instagram by typing #Palestinememes and #Israelmemes. This hashtag is used because it explicitly indicates a direct link to the context of the conflict being analysed (Klajnowska & Tulloch, 2022). Additionally, a purposive sampling strategy ensured that selected memes fulfilled specific criteria. Firstly, the memes

should include both visual and textual elements. Secondly, the memes should contain symbols or narratives related to the Palestine-Israel conflict. Thirdly, the text in memes must be in English, as the global lingua franca in digital communication (Pineda et al., 2024), suggesting that the content is intended for a wide and diverse audience beyond local or national boundaries. Memes with only visual or only textual elements, or those relying on highly localised references, were excluded.

The data collection technique in this study follows Cresswell's (2014) data collection technique, which includes observation and documentation. The researcher first searches the meme using hashtag search features on Instagram and then observes the meme to find the memes that meet the specific criteria. The selected meme will be saved by taking screenshots stored in a folder as primary data documentation.

This study employs Roland Barthes' semiological approach, focusing on two levels of meaning: denotative and connotative. The third layer of Barthes' semiotic model – myth – is deliberately set aside in this study. Rather than engaging with broader ideological narratives, the focus remains on examining how meaning is formed through the interaction of visual and textual elements within digital memes. The analytical process began by identifying key visual and textual features within each meme. These components were first examined in terms of their literal content, focusing on what is directly shown or stated (Bouzida, 2014). From there, the analysis moved toward interpreting the symbolic associations these elements might evoke, paying attention to how meaning is constructed through the interplay of visual and verbal signs. Through this two-step reading, each meme was then categorised based on its central message or theme.

This interpretive approach was informed by the broader sociopolitical context in which the memes were created and circulated – namely, the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. Attention was given not only to the content but also to the environment in which that content gained meaning. To enhance the credibility of the interpretation, the researcher engaged in multiple rounds of close reading and consulted peers in academic discussions. While the topic itself is politically charged, the analysis maintained a critical and descriptive focus, aiming to interpret meaning rather than take a political stance.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the study and interprets them through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, with particular focus on the concepts of denotation and connotation. This study aims to examine how Instagram memes related to the Palestine-Israel conflict convey ideological meanings through the interaction of visual and textual elements.

The primary data are 60 memes, collected manually using hashtags #Palestinememes and #Israelmemes. The researcher selected the memes using purposive criteria as follows: (1) each meme must contain both visual and textual components; (2) the content must relate to the Palestine-Israel conflict; (3) the text and the caption are in English.

Through a close analysis of these memes, the researcher identified nine dominant themes that represent the most frequently recurring issues on the data: State Delegitimation: 10 memes, Dehumanisation of the Opponent: 9 memes, Global Intervention: 7 memes, Political Satire: 8 memes, Historical and Land Claims: 7 memes, Media and Propaganda: 7 memes, Double Standard: 4 memes, Self-victimisation: 4 memes, and Militarisation and Weapon Technology: 4 memes.

Out of these nine themes, seven were found to represent both Israel and Palestine. However, two themes – Self-victimisation and Militarisation and Weapon Technology – were found to exclusively represent Israel. This indicates that these two themes are primarily used to critique or highlight aspects related to Israel's stance or actions in the context of the conflict. Furthermore, it also implies that Palestine is not portrayed as engaging in self-victimisation or exhibiting dominance through military and technological power within the selected memes. Therefore, in the data presentation that follows, only one meme is selected and analysed under each of these two themes to reflect this exclusive representation.

**Analysis of Memes Issues**

In this section, each of the themes is examined through a semiotic analysis of selected examples. By presenting the background of the meme template, denotative (literal meaning), and connotative (symbolic) meanings embedded in these memes, the study reveals how social media visuals operate as vehicles for political discourse in the digital age.

*Self-Victimisation*

There are two memes with the theme of self-victimisation with the hashtag #Israelmeme, both of which represent Israel. Self-victimisation is the tendency to portray oneself as a victim. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this meme criticises the Israeli military's excessive response to Palestinian resistance.



Figure 1: Diving Neymar Meme

This meme is known as "diving Neymar." This shows the overreaction of Brazilian national football player Neymar Jr., who is crying while holding his legs. This photo was taken during the FIFA World Cup in 2018, referring to the moment Neymar was considered to be overreacting to a foul committed against him. His tendency to dive and overreact often led to people's criticism on social media. That's what makes this meme so popular and has been replicated in various contexts to criticise exaggeration, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Denotatively, this meme shows two images of Neymar rolling on the pitch and overreacting to the expression of pain, with text: "Israeli soldiers when a Palestinian kid throws a rock at their tank." Connotatively, this meme depicts the dramatic and excessive reaction of the Israeli army to minor resistance. Furthermore, it also illustrates the imbalance of power between Palestinians who only have stones, and Israeli soldiers who use tanks. However, despite its strength, Israel often portrays itself as a victim or plays the victim to justify its repressive actions.

This meme presents a satirical interpretation of the unequal power in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. By featuring an image of Neymar, a well-known athlete for exaggerating reactions, the meme emphasises the irony in Israel's self-representation as a fragile victim. This meme suggests that such portrayals are used to rationalise acts of repression against a far less powerful resistance.

*Military Equipment and Technology*

Conflicts in today's modern era will certainly rely on various weapon technologies. Combining combat weapons with technological developments, many countries compete to create sophisticated weapons systems. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Israel is more often reported to have sophisticated weaponry. In line with this, the meme analysis found that there

are two memes with the hashtag #Israelmeme that represent Israel's Iron Dome weapon system.



Figure 2: Tired Boxing

The meme named Tired Boxer features an illustration of a boxer in two poses: first, it shows a Boxer standing and ready to fight, and the second depicts the Boxer looking tired as he sits and drinks water from a bottle. The common narrative templates associated with this meme “Imma...” in the first pose and “Damn...” in the second pose. This meme aims to illustrate the disparity between high expectations and reality.

Denotatively, the first pose of the Boxer representing Iron Dome is characterised by readiness with the narrative “Imma protect Israel”. In the second pose of the Boxer's, conveying fatigue with the narrative “Damn that's a lot of missiles” following a rocket attack in the sky, which is frequently attached in snippets of posts on social media. Connotatively, this meme suggests that advanced technology also has its limits. Israel's Iron Dome, which is expected to be very effective in countering air attacks, can still be overwhelmed by missile strikes, especially when they are extensive.

This meme critiques Israel's Iron Dome rocket defence technology, which is commonly seen as a high technology that is very effective in preventing airstrikes and protecting citizens. However, the Iron Dome has its limitations. Especially when following a large-scale attack from adversaries. This issue aims to raise clinical questions about Israel's ability to ensure the safety of its citizens.

#### *Land and Historical Claim*

The claim to ancestral history and territorial origin is one of the most frequently circulated themes in online discourse. The question of which ancestor is the first to inhabit the land has sparked widespread discourse on social media. These discussions are often visualised through memes that use humour and exaggeration, such as prehistoric animals like dinosaurs adorned with national symbols, including the Palestinian keffiyeh or Israeli Star of David. Some memes even push the narrative further, suggesting ancestral that date back millions of years. These portrayals, while satirical in tone, highlight the absurdity and lack of historical grounding.



Figure 3. Palestinosaurus Meme

This meme uses a template that was originally from the television series Look Around You, a British science parody program aired on the BBC (2002-2005). The show mimicked the

style of 1970s-1980s British educational documentaries, presenting absurd or fictional scientific content with a deliberately serious tone. Due to its retro-educational aesthetic, this visual format is often repurposed online to parody scientific facts or reinterpret historical narratives. In the context of the "Palestinosaurus" meme, the template is employed to mock Palestinian historical claims by equating them with fabricated prehistoric discoveries, highlighting their perceived absurdity.

Denotatively, this meme shows a T-Rex wearing a keffiyeh and carrying a gun, with the narration "8 million years ago, the Palestinosaurus already lived here." There is a TV presenter next to it, explaining the animal as if it were an animal. Connotatively, the T-rex symbolises a prehistoric animal. Keffiyeh symbolises the characteristics of the Palestinian people. T-Rex with Keffiyeh aims to symbolise the absurdity of the Palestinians' ancestors. The hyperbolic narrative shows a firm rejection of the historical claims of the ancestors. In addition, T-Rex with Keffiyeh and holding a gun shows that the Palestinians are aggressors who claim the territory by means of violence and war.

This meme satirises the ancestral historical claims made by the Palestinians in a hyperbolic and conflicting way. The 'Palestinosaurus' character depicts a prehistoric claim to the territory. This can be an indication that historical claims are often used in a hyperbolic way to exaggerate the justify political positions.



*Figure 4. Ancient Komodo meme*

This meme depicts a Komodo dragon wearing a necklace with the Star of David symbol walking towards a person with the text: 'Hello... 300 million years ago my grandfather, Tyrannosaurus Rex, used to live here. Get out!'. At the top, it says 'Zionist be like' which directly insinuates to the Zionist group. There is a man standing at the door, confused and surprised. This meme is a combination of the 'Door meme', which is often used to describe awkward encounters or unreasonable requests.

Denotatively, this meme shows a Komodo dragon wearing a necklace with a Star of David symbol, walking towards a man who is standing by an open door. There is a narration from the komodo dragon that says, "Hello... 300 million years ago, my grandfather, Tyrannosaurus Rex, used to live here. Get out!" At the top of the meme reads, "Zionist, be like." The connotation of this meme is to mock the historical claims of the Israelis, who are depicted as Komodo dragons. Such claims are considered absurd or too far-fetched to justify modern politics. The Komodo dragon connotatively symbolises a prehistoric animal, while the Star of David necklace represents the Israelis. The combination of the Komodo dragon with the Star of David necklace illustrates the absurdity of the Israelis' ancestral/historical claim to the territory. The hyperbolic narrative shows a firm rejection of the ancestral historical claim. The person who opens the door is likened to a Palestinian as the owner of the territory and is asked to leave.

This meme criticises the historical ancestral claims of Israel to claim ownership of territory. This meme argues that such claims are no longer relevant to the current situation. Through ridiculous metaphors and hyperbolic text, this meme mocks attempts to justify political actions based on absurd historical narratives.

*Global Intervention*

In the conflicts between two countries, multiple nations often support one side or the other. This support can be in various ways. Not all supportive countries take an active role in the conflict. Those that do will be referred to as global interveners. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, generally, Palestine got support from neighbouring Arab countries. Meanwhile, Israel receives significant backing from Europe and the U.S.A.



Figure 5. Sonic the Hedgehog meme

This meme uses a template from the movie *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020). This Sonic meme was very popular at the time. It gained significant popularity, not only because the Sonic character himself was very well known, but also because of the massive criticism surrounding Sonic's character design in the first movie. This is what made the Sonic the Hedgehog meme viral and widespread on social media, with various versions. This particular version features footage of Sonic miraculously surviving various dangerous situations. Combined with a male character in a car named Tom Machowski, played by James Marsden.

Denotatively, in the top panel of this meme shows a man in a car with flags of various countries and groups that are considered enemies of Israel, including Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Nazi Germany, and Lebanon. The man asked, "How are you not dead?". In the bottom panel, Sonic, adorned with Israeli flags, spreads his arms with a confused expression and replies, "I have no idea!". The connotation of this meme suggests that despite facing numerous interventions from hostile countries and groups, Israel manages to survive. This narrative reinforces the perception of Israel as a resilient country fortunate enough to withstand global threats.

The meme highlights the global intervention by Arab countries surrounding the Palestinian territories in support of Palestine against Israel. Yet, it portrays Israel as miraculously surviving these global attacks. Additionally, the meme can be interpreted as a cynical representation of the complex politics in the Middle East, showing that not only countries but also groups or organisations are involved in this conflict.

#### *State Delegitimation*

State delegitimation is an attempt to challenge or reject the status of a power over a certain area as a legitimate state. In this context, the memes often reflect a narrative that aims to question the legitimacy of the state status of both Palestine and Israel. Frequently, the memes that appear include elements that criticise the political existence, national symbols and recognition of other countries.





Figure 6. Meme discovering something that doesn't exist

This meme, called “Discovering something that doesn't exist”, comes from the animated series ‘Phineas and Ferb’. The series is popular with scenes where the main character, Phineas, often discovers something strange or surprising with his friends. In this meme, the scene is taken from an episode where Phineas and Ferb discover a tangible but invisible object. This meme is often used in various contexts to mock the notion of something that should exist, but does not.

Denotatively, this meme displays two characters from the animated series ‘Phineas and Ferb’, the character Phineas on the left with the Israeli flag and Ferb on the right with the United States, both are uncovering something covered with cloth with the narration “Discovering something that doesn't exist.” In the bottom panel, it turns out that the thing they found is the Palestinian flag. Connotatively, the use of the symbols of the USA and Israel flags in this meme indicates a harmonious relationship between the two countries. This meme suggests that Palestine was only recognised as a country after the establishment of Israel. It directly implies that Palestine is a newly recognised country and attempts to erase its identity.

This meme takes aim at the narrative that seeks to erase Palestine’s historical presence and identity. By showing Israel alongside the United States (represented by the characters’ heads), reacting with surprise to the existence of Palestine, I expose the irony in that denial. It uses satire not just for humour, but as a critique of the way Palestine’s reality is often overlooked or dismissed. At the same time, it serves as a visual form of resistance, both political and symbolic, calling attention to how absurd it is to deny a presence that continues to persist despite ongoing efforts to erase it.



Figure 7. Death and the soul meme

This meme uses a template from the comic ‘Death and the Soul,’ which is popular with meme fans because it specialises in delivering a final judgement before going to the afterlife to be punished. This template is usually used to mark the end of an entity that is then given a moral judgement in a tragic or ironic context. This meme is found in many versions in several contexts, such as political, social or cultural. In this instance, the meme repurposes the template to critique the existence of Israel as a state.

On a denotative level, the meme consists of a four-panel comic. The Israeli flag is depicted as a character speaking with the Grim Reaper. The flag asks, "Was I a good country?" to which Death replies, "No, you weren't even a country." Connotatively, the message challenges the legitimacy of Israel's statehood, implying that Israel was never truly a nation to begin with. The imagery reinforces anti-colonial narratives that reject Israel's historical and legal claims to sovereignty, portraying it instead as a colonial entity imposed upon Palestinian land.

The Grim Reaper, in this context, represents finality and judgment symbolically. Through this visual metaphor, the meme delivers a strong statement delegitimising Israel's founding, aligning with the broader discourse that views the state not as a rightful nation but as a settler-colonial project. It articulates a moment of supposed introspection before symbolic erasure, thereby supporting the stance that Israel's existence lacks historical and ethical justification.

### *Political Satire*

Humour has long been a tool for political critique, and satire, in particular, allows people to respond to political decisions or social conditions with irony and exaggeration. In digital spaces, especially within meme culture, this kind of commentary often targets governments, policies, and political figures. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, satirical memes often seek to highlight imbalanced power dynamics between these countries. It scrutinises how the international community portrays the situation, and critiques official political narratives using humour and visual symbolism.

"Poor families from Gaza":



Figure 8. Bernie Sanders meme

This meme template comes from Bernie Sanders' political campaign video in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. At that moment, he says, "I am once again asking for your financial support." Sanders was widely recognised as a presidential candidate. Besides, he also known as a progressive politic figure who effectively leveraged social media for political messaging. His distinctive style and online presence led to a proliferation of memes, one of the most notable being this particular template. This meme is very popular because of its concise and clear style of speech that emphasises the request for financial support in a repetitive manner. It is widely used to satirise those in financial distress. In this context, it is used to highlight the poor condition of Gazans who continually ask for donations through social media.

Denotatively, it features an older man wearing a winter jacket, standing outdoors with a serious expression. The man is Bernie Sanders. Top text: "Poor families from Gaza." Lower text: "I am once again asking for your financial support." Connotatively, this meme uses the image of Bernie Sanders, known for his advocacy for social justice, juxtaposed with the narrative of poor families in Gaza. It informs that the people of Gaza are constantly in need and begging for financial assistance from the outside world.

This meme, utilising the image of Bernie Sanders as a popular political figure, highlights the irony in international relations. This explicitly shows how the international community often expresses support for humanitarian aid to Gaza on social media. It also critiques the frequent requests for donations made by individuals in Gaza on social media.



Figure 9. Free parking in Gaza

This meme uses a multi-panel image template featuring a combination of viral memes: a Muslim woman as a pro-Palestine activist, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, and the Free Palestine slogan, while the bottom displays a sign reading "Free Parking - Gaza." Memes with this format seem to be specifically designed for discussing this conflict. They are sometimes created based on the authentic ideas of the creator for specific purposes.

Denotatively, this meme shows a woman shouting "Free Palestine," followed by a response from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: "I have a better idea," and a photo of a road sign reading "P Free - Gaza," which means "Free Parking in Gaza." Connotatively, the fundamental slogan of Palestine, "Free Palestine," which symbolises Palestinian freedom, is discredited by Israel. It twists the meaning to "Free parking in Gaza." This is a cruel satire that degrades the symbol of freedom by equating it with surrender.

This meme uses the image of Benjamin Netanyahu as a political figure who has often voiced a strong and ruthless stance towards Palestine. This meme aims to enhance the role of satire as a tool of criticism against the uncaring attitude towards the symbol of Palestinian freedom.

#### *Opponent Dehumanisation*

Dehumanisation of opponents, which is an attempt to demean certain groups by depicting them inhumanely. In this case, memes are often found using symbols of characters with weapons, violence, bombs, animal behaviour and others that depict the group as inhuman.



Figure 10. Spongebob Jellyfish Hunter Meme

This meme comes from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which is often used as a meme due to the popularity of the series and the silly behaviour of the characters. This makes the SpongeBob character easy to use as a meme with various contexts, one of which is conflict. This meme template was taken from the jellyfish hunting scene. In the original scene, SpongeBob is holding a net, yet it is replaced with a gun in this meme.

Denotatively, this meme shows SpongeBob holding a gun. He shows a crazy expression by sticking out his tongue and eyes. There is the text “No One: Palestinians:”

Connotatively, this meme forms a negative view of Palestinians, that violence is their nature. Palestinians are also portrayed as mad and dangerous people with weapons who can attack even without a trigger.

This meme conveys the message that Palestinians are aggressive for no apparent reason. The denotative layer featuring SpongeBob’s character is used to make the meme seem light and easy to accept. Besides, it connotatively leads to a dehumanising opinion of the Palestinians.



Figure 11. UNO Draw 25 Cards Meme

This meme template is derived from a viral meme that uses the UNO card game. In the original format, a person is shown holding cards with a handwritten rule of either do something right or take 25 cards. However, the character prefers to take 25 cards. This meme is popular because it conveys the message that a person prefers severe punishment in the game rather than making good value choices.

Denotatively, this meme shows two panels on the left and right. The left panel shows a UNO card that reads “Stop killing innocent civilians OR draw 25”, while the right panel shows a person holding many cards, his face edited with the Israeli flag.

Connotatively, this meme implies that Israel consciously refuses to stop its violence against Palestinian civilians. It is symbolised by someone who would rather take 25 cards than stop killing.

This meme contains a sharp criticism of Israel's violent actions during the conflict with Palestine. Using denotative symbols in the form of choices in the UNO game makes an impression that is easy to understand but has a deep connotative meaning of immorality. This meme aims to portray Israel as an inhumane group.

#### *Media Propaganda*

Media propaganda, which is how media and information are produced, disseminated and manipulated to shape public perceptions of a party or issue. This theme reflects the narrative dynamics in social or political conflicts, where different groups frame their opponents by manipulating reality.



Figure 12. SpongeBob filing meme

This meme uses a template from the animated series *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which is the document archive scene. This meme is often found depicting the hidden contents of a group or institution with labelled files. This meme is popular, not only because of the popularity of the *SpongeBob* series but also because it is often used to satirise an organisation or individual who keeps secrets.

Denotatively, this meme shows a drawer containing several file archives labelled 'LIES', 'PROPAGANDA', 'FAKE VIDEO', 'BOTS', 'AI PHOTOS', 'FAKE RECORDINGS', 'FAKE CLAIMS', 'DENIAL', and 'MORE LIES'. At the top are the words 'Free Palestine "activist" POV' and a Palestinian flag icon. Connotatively, this meme accuses that pro-Palestinian activism is perceived as a collection of lies and digital manipulation. This can be seen through the various archive files owned by these activists. It aims to undermine the credibility of Palestinian supporters through their media institutions.

This meme attempts to discredit pro-Palestinian activists by portraying their efforts as based on falsehoods and manipulation. Using a scene from *SpongeBob SquarePants* that shows organised files in a drawer, the meme suggests that these activists rely on misleading content. Although it appears humorous, the underlying message aims to shape a negative perception of the Palestinian support movement and question its credibility.



Figure 13. Will Smith slap meme

This meme template comes from a real-life moment, during the 2022 Oscars, when actor Will Smith came on stage to slap comedian Chris Rock. The scene went viral and was widely adapted into various meme contexts. It is generally used to describe a violent or exaggerated response to a trivial matter.

Denotatively, it shows Will Smith, who is labelled 'Zionists' anti-Semitism claims' slapping Chris Rock, who is labelled "Anyone supporting Palestine". Connotatively, this meme highlights how any expression of support for Palestine is often attacked with accusations of antisemitism. With the aim of frightening Palestinian supporters who want to voice criticism of Israel.

This meme criticises how support for Palestine is often met with aggressive pushback in the form of antisemitism accusations. By using a viral moment from the 2022 Oscars – where Will Smith slaps Chris Rock – it draws a parallel to how pro-Palestinian voices are swiftly

attacked, even when the message itself is relatively harmless. The dramatic visual from the image of Will Smith emphasises the disproportionate reaction and suggests that such tactics are used to intimidate or silence criticism of Israel.

#### *Double Standard*

Double standards are the application of different rules, judgments or treatment of individuals or groups. Often encountered in a variety of contexts, including politics, it is often characterised by political, economic or ideological bias. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, double standards are often highlighted in the context of media coverage, international policy and the global community's reaction to both sides.



Figure 14. Hello Human Resources Meme

This meme template is based on the popular "Hello Human Resources" template, created by a meme maker. This meme is very popular and can be found across various prominent meme-sharing platforms, such as Reddit. Generally, the template features a two-panel comic strip layout, which is used to contrast a worker's differing reactions toward a colleague who showed up from behind. It often serves to highlight themes such as double standards or dualism reaction behaviour in the workplace or social dynamics.

Denotatively, this meme shows two comic panels, wherein in the first panel, a man with a Nazi symbol says, 'I want to eradicate Jews,' and the response given by the employee is to call HR, while in the second panel, a man with a Palestinian flag symbol says the same thing but gets a compassionate response. Connotatively, this meme suggests a narrative about how hate speech is perceived differently based on the speaker's identity. It illustrates a double standard in societal responses, where actions from Nazis are universally condemned, while similar rhetoric from Palestinians is sometimes viewed more leniently.

This biased meme aims to highlight what it sees as a double standard in how similar acts of hate speech are judged depending on who expresses the sentiment. It presents two comic panels showing identical statements from two different characters, one representing a Nazi, the other a Palestinian. While the first is met with condemnation, the second receives an acceptable response. This contrast conveys that public reactions to harmful rhetoric are not always consistent and that certain groups may be viewed more appreciatively despite expressing similar sentiments.



Figure 15. Drake Hotline Bling meme

The meme template featured in this image is popularly known as “Drakeposting” or the “Drake Hotline Bling Meme.” It originates from the 2015 music video *Hotline Bling* by Canadian rapper Drake. The meme consists of two contrasting panels showing Drake’s facial expressions: in the top panel, he appears to reject something with a dismissive hand gesture and a displeased expression, while in the bottom panel, he smiles approvingly and gestures in agreement. Generally, this meme is typically used to juxtapose two options or statements in an ironic manner, seeming to say ‘no’ to this but ‘yes’ to the other. It highlights a clear preference or bias toward one, even when both choices may be morally or logically equivalent.

Denotatively, this meme features two images of Drake, at the top with a gesture rejecting “Other types of colonialism” and at the bottom with a gesture accepting “Muslim colonialism”. Connotatively, this meme carries a message about double standards in how colonial history is judged. The top panel suggests that general forms of colonialism, especially by European or Western powers, are seen as negative and are rejected. Meanwhile, the bottom panel shows a more favourable or accepting view of colonialism carried out by Muslim powers in the past, such as the Ottoman Caliphate or Islamic expansions. This contrast points to the possibility that some people, whether in academic discussions or public debates, apply selective criticism, condemning one form of colonialism while ignoring others due to ideological beliefs, cultural identity, or group affiliation.

This meme uses the “Drakeposting” format to criticise the selective judgment often applied to colonial history. The denotative elements show Drake rejecting “Other types of colonialism” and approving “Muslim colonialism.” Through this simple visual contrast, the meme conveys a deeper, connotative message: that there may be a double standard in how different forms of colonialism are evaluated. The meme suggests that while Western colonialism is widely condemned, colonial actions by Muslim powers are sometimes defended or overlooked, revealing possible ideological or cultural biases behind such judgments.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to investigate how Instagram memes concerning the Palestine–Israeli conflict construct meanings through multimodal semiotics, specifically applying Roland Barthes’ denotative-connotative framework. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, 60 memes were purposively sampled via hashtags #Palestinememes and #Israelmemes, then analysed through close semiotic reading of visual-textual interactions. The findings reveal that memes serve as potent tools for political discourse, where denotative elements (e.g., familiar formats such as “UNO Draw 25,” “Drakeposting,” or “Bernie Sanders”) work in tandem with connotative meanings to express ideological stances—such as portraying Palestine as an oppressed victim (e.g., “UNO Draw 25”) or critiquing the historical legitimacy of Israel (e.g., “Palestinosaurus” or “Ancient Komodo”). These multimodal signs demonstrate how memes condense complex geopolitical narratives into emotionally resonant and easily circulated content, aligning with Barthes’ view of signs producing layered meaning beyond the literal. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on meme virality or audience engagement

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(Zidani, 2021), this study addresses a scholarly gap by offering a systematic examination of meaning-making processes embedded in meme symbolism. As Samreen (2024) and Rahmawati (2024) have shown, digital memes often rely on shared cultural knowledge to function effectively; this study extends their work into the realm of global political conflict, where such shared codes intersect with ideology, emotion, and misinformation. Theoretically, this research reinforces the value of Roland Barthes' semiotic model in unpacking political messaging in digital spaces. Memes like the "SpongeBob with a gun" (which dehumanises Palestinians) and "Free Parking in Gaza" (which satirises slogans of liberation) exemplify how intertextuality and connotation operate to either affirm or subvert dominant narratives. The combination of humor, sarcasm, and symbolic references transforms these memes into powerful rhetorical tools in the digital landscape of public opinion. Practically, the study highlights the essential importance of digital literacy, particularly for students and young people who are the primary users of social media platforms. As Cervi & Divon (2023) point out, memes are not merely for entertainment – they function as "playful activism" with real ideological impact. The ability to critically interpret visual rhetoric is crucial for young users to avoid manipulation, polarisation, or mobilisation by misleading digital content. The meme featuring Neymar offers a satirical take on how Israel often presents itself as a victim, drawing attention to the ways in which humor can be used to mask or normalize political bias. At the same time, the findings suggest that memes also hold potential as learning tools – especially for younger viewers – by encouraging them to think more critically about political messages and representations they encounter online. However, limitations include the sample's size (60 memes) and exclusive focus on denotation-connotation, omitting Barthes' "myth" layer. Future research should expand datasets, incorporate audience reception studies, and compare cross-platform semiotic strategies to deepen consensus on meme-mediated political communication.

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