

The Impact of Digital Memes in Mainstream Media Narratives: Reporting of Human Wildlife Conflict in Kerala

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Abstract

This study examines how digital memes influence mainstream Malayalam media coverage of human-wildlife conflicts (HWC) in Kerala, India. It identifies a “memetic bandwagon effect,” where viral meme narratives, such as sympathetic victims or satirical heroes - shape newspaper framing, as perceived online popularity drives subsequent media adoption (Bindra et al., 2022). A two-month content analysis (April–May 2023) of two major Malayalam newspapers and a stratified sample of Facebook posts examined narrative frames, tone, causal attribution, and meme-specific elements of anthropomorphism, satire and viral language. Findings of the study show newspapers consistently aligned with online sentiment, shifting from traditional hard-news reporting toward frames emphasizing ecological causality and coexistence. The study concludes that digital memes catalyze the amplification of social media discourse within newspaper narratives on HWC, with quantifiable online sentiment being internalized by mainstream media and reshaping how this complex issue is framed. This highlights memetic logic as a significant, non-institutional force in contemporary news production.

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Introduction

As of Kerala Forest Statistics 2022-23, the total forest area under the administrative jurisdiction of the Kerala Forest Department stands at 11,531.908 km², constituting 29.67% of the state's total land area (38,863 km²). Among this 6442.771 km² (55.87%) is reserved forests, 3066.184 km² (26.59%) is protected area, and 1583.584 km² (13.73%) is vested forests. The proposed reserved forests and Ecologically Fragile Lands (EFL) consist of only 2.62% and 1.19%, respectively. Kerala's forests are located in two biogeographic provinces, the Western Ghats and the Western Coast. They are renowned for their biodiversity, their critical role in environmental preservation, and their abundance of rare and endangered plants and animals. Based on the NITI Aayog and NCEAR census population projections for 2022-23, Kerala has a population of 35.8 million, representing 2.6 percent of India's total population. However, it only accounts for 1.18 percent of the country's land. As per 2021 projections, Kerala's population density, at 913 persons per sq. km, is more than double the national average (415 persons per sq. km). The high population density in a state with nearly 30 percent of its area covered by forests makes it highly sensitive to human-wildlife interactions.

Recent times have witnessed numerous cases of human-wildlife conflict along forest borders in Kerala. These include incursions by wild elephants into agricultural lands and habitations near forests, instances of wild boars consuming all planted crops, and tiger attacks. According to the 2014 Kasturirangan Report, more than 3 million people from 123 villages in Kerala live near protected forest land, making them vulnerable to wild-animal attacks. The cultivation of cash crops by removing native species destabilizes the environment, making forests less hospitable to local wildlife (Cholayil, G., 2024). Human population growth, agricultural expansion, infrastructure development in the forest, and climate change are among the factors contributing to frequent, calamitous, and widespread human-wildlife conflicts in Kerala. A major cause of wild animal invasions in the state's human settlements is the proximity of farmland to forests in the Western Ghats, which extend across Kerala.

According to the Kerala Forest Statistics Report 2022-23, 8873 wild animal attacks have been reported in the state in 2022-23 alone, leading to 98 human fatalities and 1275 injuries. 637 cattle death cases were reported in this period, and 6863 incidents of crop damage and property loss. As Kerala state forest minister, A.K. Saseendran informed the Kerala Legislative Assembly on 18 September 2025 that, between 2021 and July 31, 2025, a total of 390 people lost their lives in such incidents. Among these 67 fatalities were reported from the tribal communities alone. The government has distributed 41.33 crore rupees in compensation to people affected by wildlife attacks during this period. Families of the deceased received 23.73 crore rupees, and the state disbursed 17.59 crore as compensation for the 5,464 people who sustained injuries in wildlife attacks (“Wildlife attacks: Kerala records 390 deaths,” 2025).

Solar-powered electric fencing is considered an effective measure to prevent these attacks; however, it is not practical in all cases due to its cost and potential harm to animals. Elephant trenches, elephant-proof walls, and check dams have been built along the forest edges. Stringent legal provisions governing wildlife conservation under central legislation constrain the large-scale implementation of preventive measures. Other common defensive strategies adopted by local people include nets, PVC cannons, and pellets. The effectiveness of such measures is minimal.

Human- Wildlife Conflict and Media Framing in Kerala

Modern interpretations of human-wildlife interactions, structured by the Anthropocene paradigm, prompt us to rethink the role of media in this issue. Beyond covering the conflict, the media actively influences public opinion, legislative decisions, and, ultimately, the conflict-mitigation process. In Kerala, conflicts between humans and wildlife have been a persistent issue in the media for decades. This typically falls under the umbrella of ‘environmental journalism, which is described as current affairs reporting on nature and the environment, particularly the effects of human activities on the environment and the conflicts between humans and wildlife (Kumar, 2025), with the intention of increasing public awareness.

In general, environmental journalism focuses on covering the concerns in a direct, hard-news style. It is the creation and publication of reports on ongoing conflicts

in human-wildlife interactions, along with extensive analysis of the events themselves, the people involved, and relevant conditions, based on data gathered from reliable sources. Less concretely and more intuitively, the background information that gives rise to the conflicts is also included in these stories. A variety of reactions to such circumstances are employed to highlight the intricacy of the problems. The information on human-wildlife conflicts is comprehensive yet fragmented by the specific features and soft stories associated with these conflicts.

Various framings affect the objectivity of media narratives on HWCs (Jacobson et al., 2020). While emphasizing certain aspects of the story, they invite practical repercussions in society, including influence on policy, swaying public opinion, weakening conservation initiatives, and oversimplifying complex matters. The incorporation of binaries such as villain/victim, tragedy/unavoidable conflict, and coexistence/solution in media narratives makes the information ecosystem too simplistic. It fails to capture the nuances of the broader issue of HWCs. This trend is rampant across ubiquitous digital networks; thus, the positioning of conventional media practices in HWCs remains critical for channeling public opinion and shaping public policy and actions.

Media reporting may affect risk perception by dramatizing risk information, offering unnecessary symbolic associations with popular cultural products lacking context, and profiling disagreements among actors in a risk debate. Environmental populism, particularly in its adaptation to the twenty-first-century traditional media ecology, has intensified (Bosworth, K., 2022). Intriguingly, competition amongst media outlets makes journalists less likely to produce novel content and more likely to engage with popular sentiments (Estella, 2021), thereby reducing the likelihood that content reaches the core of the issue. These aspects are evident in the case of a wild tusker, locally known as '*Arikompan*', who roamed freely in the fringes of the Chinnakkanal forest in Idukki district, Kerala, and was subsequently captured and translocated to the Periyar Tiger Reserve.

The Story of the Wild Tusker, *Arikompan*, from Chinnakkanal

A wild tusker, locally known as *Arikompan*, has been reported to range across the Chinnakkanal region of Idukki district, Kerala, since the 1990s. Local narratives and media reports frequently describe the elephant as having been orphaned

following the death of its mother, a circumstance often cited to explain its subsequent behavioral patterns and its alleged “rogue” status. The name *Arikomban* is derived from the Malayalam words *ari* (rice) and *komban* (tusker), reflecting the animal’s repeated incursions into human settlements and grain stores. According to an affidavit submitted by the Kerala government before the High Court, the tusker was responsible for the deaths of more than seven people in Idukki district and for extensive damage to houses and commercial establishments.

In response to escalating human–wildlife conflict, the state forest department apprehended *Arikomban* on April 29, 2023, and translocated him to the Periyar Tiger Reserve, approximately 80 kilometers from Chinnakkanal. The decision to retain the elephant in captivity and train it as a kumki - a captive elephant used to manage wild elephants was legally challenged through a Public Interest Litigation filed by People for Animals (PFA), Trivandrum Chapter, and the Walking Eye Foundation for Animal Advocacy. Acting on the petition, the Kerala High Court directed the authorities to explore alternative solutions. Subsequently, *Arikomban* crossed into Cumbum town in Tamil Nadu’s Theni district, prompting the Tamil Nadu Forest Department to tranquilize him again on June 5, 2023, and relocate him to the Kalakkad–Mundanthurai forests in Kanyakumari district, where he currently resides.

Despite the elephant’s documented involvement in human fatalities and property destruction, *Arikomban* rapidly emerged as a cultural and emotional symbol within Kerala’s public sphere. Initial media coverage focused on the devastation caused by the tusker and the trauma of affected residents. However, this framing soon shifted, with several news outlets and social media platforms foregrounding narratives that humanized the animal. Media content began to include speculative reconstructions of *Arikomban*’s ‘family history,’ references to supposed mates and offspring, and portrayals of companionship with another tusker, Chakkakomban (Sebastian, 2023). Through such narratives, *Arikomban* was reimagined simultaneously as a villain and a victim, producing heightened emotional investment and polarised public debate.

This transformation was most visible initially within digital media spaces, where *Arikomban* rapidly emerged as a symbol of regional pride and ecological sentiment. Online fan communities proliferated, with Facebook groups amassing

tens of thousands of members, as well as dedicated YouTube channels and pages that tracked the tusker's movements and daily activities. Sculptures were erected in his honor, petitions circulated demanding state and central intervention, and proposals for cinematic representations of his life gained traction. Seemingly mundane visual content, such as footage of the elephant eating, resting, or roaming forest landscapes, circulated widely as memes and short-form videos, generating affective engagement and reinforcing his celebrity-like status within the digital public sphere.

Crucially, this digitally produced affective momentum did not remain confined to social media. Newspapers and television news outlets increasingly adopted these popular frames, recalibrating their coverage to align with prevailing online sentiment. As a result, reporting shifted away from conventional hard-news paradigms centered on administrative accountability and human casualties toward narrative forms that emphasize individualized animal subjectivity.

The *Arikomban* case thus demonstrates how memetic logic functions as a non-institutional yet influential force in contemporary news production. Rather than acting solely as gatekeepers or neutral observers, mainstream media increasingly internalize digitally legible popular sentiment in their framing practices. This dynamic underscores the need for media and environmental communication scholarship to account for the role of memes, affective circulation, and platform metrics in shaping public discourse on human–wildlife conflict, with implications for policy deliberation, public understanding, and equitable conservation outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

In this context, this study seeks to identify and examine the role of digital social media content, particularly memes, in influencing the framing of Human-Wildlife conflict in the newspaper reportage in Kerala, by considering the case of a wild tusker, *Arikompan*. The study also explores the extent to which the proliferation of digital memetic content may be associated with a 'memetic bandwagon effect' on conventional media practices.

Objectives of the Study

The broader objective of the study is to understand how digital memes circulating on social media shape the way newspapers frame human–wildlife conflict in Kerala.

Specific Objectives were to:

1. Map and classify the different kinds of digital memes that find their way into newspaper narratives on human–wildlife conflict.
2. Examine how newspapers use these ‘memetic’ elements to construct stories and frames about human–wildlife conflict.
3. Explore whether the popularity and circulation of memes on social media generate a bandwagon effect that influences conventional newspaper practices in the digital age.
4. Identify patterns of interaction and agenda-setting between social media platforms and newspapers in shaping narratives of human–wildlife conflict.

Research Questions

1. What types and categories of digital memes appear in newspaper narratives on human - wildlife conflict, and how can these memetic elements be classified?
2. How do newspapers incorporate and utilize memetic elements to construct stories and frames around human–wildlife conflict?
3. To what extent does the popularity and viral circulation of memes on social media create a bandwagon effect that shapes or influences conventional newspaper reporting practices in the digital age?
4. What patterns of interaction and agenda-setting exist between social media platforms and newspapers in shaping and disseminating narratives of human-wildlife conflict?

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Digital Memes is an interdisciplinary framework that extends Dawkins's original idea of memes. Digital memes emerge as innovative templates created by users, called the 'creation' or 'genesis,' and often occur in specialized online communities (Hazman et al., 2024). Other users then copy and modify this in the stage of variation or mutation. The most creative and functional memes will flourish. Likes, shares, and algorithms are used to select memes that resonate with a broader audience for their humor, relatability, timeliness, or emotional impact. Not all digital memes impact users. Memes that tap into emotions such as frustration, joy, or absurdity will spread more quickly. When working within a community or cultural system, memes should function appropriately within that system. Also, a platform's technical features directly shape how memes are created and spread. Digital memes are the primary form of participatory culture, breaking down the traditional barrier between media producers and consumers. It allows users to create their own meanings and comments on the world. They are potent tools for framing complex issues in a specific, often ironic or humorous, light. Memes can shape the topics and discourse patterns of public opinion formation. Creating and sharing memes is a way to express individuality, humor, political views, and cultural knowledge.

The Bandwagon Effect

The bandwagon effect is a social psychological phenomenon in which people do something primarily because others are doing it, regardless of their own beliefs (Muchnik et al., 2013). On social media, public metrics such as daily active users, likes, shares, and comments on a post serve as social proof of acceptance, and algorithmic amplification highlights what is already popular. These dynamics pressure newspapers to change their priorities, often at the expense of their core journalistic values (Tandoc, E. C., 2014). Newspapers traditionally set the agenda based on editorial judgment of what is important. Now, they are often forced to cover what is trending on social media (Anderson, C.W., 2013). A viral but trivial story can dominate the news cycle simply because the social media "bandwagon" has given it immense volume. Newspapers become 'forced' to cover it to avoid losing relevance and traffic. This leads to "clickbait journalism" and the trivialization of news, crowding out important but less "viral" issues.

Social media algorithms utilize information that evokes strong emotions in people, such as fear, fury, or outrage (Tuhin, M, 2025). Newspapers covering the event are under tremendous pressure to use the same framing once the trend has begun. Newspapers that attempt to present a fair and accurate account of a dispute are frequently accused of “both-sides-ism” or bias, which can lead to narrative homogeneity. This forces them to sacrifice objectivity and balance in news reporting, which are considered core principles of ethical journalism. As soon as a post appears on social media, conjecture starts to spread. Newspapers are under pressure to publish with little verification to stay ahead of the competition. As a result, the misinformation and disinformation spread quickly. If an inaccurate version of a story receives public attention, subsequent corrections rarely reach the same audience and have the same impact.

Modern technologies, including ‘AI’, have given newspapers a new opportunity to interact with readers and achieve unprecedented reach among the new generation. The most prosperous newspapers today are those that have mastered the art of following trends without being drowned in them. They use social media trends as a source of leads and audience insight. However, they counter the bandwagon’s shallow, reactive nature by providing the depth, context, and verification that only professional journalism can offer.

Media Narratives and Framing Theory

Media narratives frequently present events that feature distinct heroes, villains, victims, and conflicts. These narratives condense complex and disorganized events into a more palatable format with a beginning, middle, and conclusion. In print media, reporters will write the story, photographers will take photographs, and editors may restructure the story for publication. This representation may or may not reflect reality. Selection, emphasis, language, and framing are all used in this structure. Through this process, they will decide which facts, events, and voices to include and which to exclude, giving particular parts of the story greater weight or prominence, employing words with specific meanings, and ultimately presenting the story in a way that helps the audience interpret it.

Media coverage of an event can be either thematic or episodic. It can simply report on an event as it happens or take center stage for weeks, months, or even years, influencing public opinion long after the event. Most of the time, the

ideological tilt of a media organization reflects either a deliberate strategy for reporting on an event, subject, or conflict, or it arises unconsciously from journalistic practices, shared cultural presumptions, or pack journalism, in which multiple outlets adopt the same narratives.

Various socio-political and economic factors shape media narratives (Kurum, 2018) and contribute to information gatekeeping within the media. It encompasses news values, whereby dramatic occurrences that entail conflict or feature celebrities are more likely to be selected and developed into stories. Officials, legislators, and corporate public relations departments are adept at “feeding” the media narratives through press releases, briefings, and leaks. They often craft narratives that resonate with their target audience’s beliefs and values to maintain viewership or readership. Finally, sensational or emotionally charged narratives often attract greater attention, leading to higher ratings and advertising revenue (Aiko, 2024).

Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” This study uses Entman’s four functions of framing: define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies to identify and analyze the dominant frames in a corpus of digital memes about the Kerala human-wildlife conflict. It discusses where networked publics (through memes) now set the agenda and define the terms of the debate for mainstream media, and provides a rigorous framework for deconstructing the narrative elements within memes, moving beyond seeing them as mere humor to understanding them as competing frames.

Research Design

Data Sources and Time Frame

This study employed a mixed-methods content analysis, drawing on data from print and social media platforms. Based on circulation figures published by the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), two Malayalam newspapers with circulations exceeding one million - Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhumi - were selected. News reports related to the ‘*Arikomban*’ human–animal conflict were collected

from the Thiruvananthapuram editions of these newspapers published between April 1 and May 31, 2023. For the digital component, Facebook was selected due to its prominence in public discourse in Kerala. Relevant posts were retrieved using Facebook's native search function with the keyword "*Arikomban*."

Sampling

The sample was limited to content directly related to the *Arikomban* issue. All retrieved newspaper articles were screened for relevance, yielding a corpus of 77 for analysis. For social media, the top 50 Facebook posts were selected using the Crowd Tangle method based on engagement metrics. The sample included posts from individual users, public groups, organizational pages, and news outlets.

Media Content Coding

Media content analysis was conducted to identify patterns in issue representation (Krippendorff, 2004). Newspaper articles were coded using variables such as newshole prominence, headline framing, attribution of blame, political dimensions, empathetic elements, and mitigation measures. A common analytical framework was applied to both newspaper and social media datasets to enable systematic comparison. Codebooks were developed to capture recurring themes, frames, and narrative elements.

The coding variables include

- Preliminary / Identification Variables
- Newshole Prominence (Salience): Captures how much space/visibility the story or post receives - an indicator of perceived newsworthiness.
- Headline / Caption Framing: Captures the tone and interpretive slant embedded in the headline (news) or caption/text overlay (meme/post).
- Memetic Element Classification
- Attribution of Blame / Responsibility
- Political Dimensions

- Empathetic Elements
- Mitigation Measures
- Cross-Platform Comparative Variables

Identification of Frames and Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify dominant memetic themes, including conflict and blame, tragedy and loss, coexistence and solutions, and humor or sensationalism. Framing analysis examined interpretive structures such as victim–villain, problem–solution, conflict, and satirical frames.

Findings from print and digital media were analyzed using a comparative framing approach to assess the bandwagon effect of digital memes on newspaper narratives. The analysis examined intermedia amplification, narrative convergence, and the influence of social media discourse on newspaper coverage. Memes were categorized based on their narrative functions: summarising, critical, or sensationalizing.

Findings and Analysis

Both Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhumi allocated substantial editorial space to reporting on the wild tusker during the study period. In April 2023, Malayala Manorama published 23 news stories in its Thiruvananthapuram edition, while Mathrubhumi carried 10 reports on the issue. During the same month, Manorama published three special features, compared to two in Mathrubhumi. In May 2023, coverage intensified in both newspapers. Mathrubhumi published 19 news reports, whereas Manorama carried 22 stories. In addition, Manorama published nine special features, while Mathrubhumi published four special features and one lead story. Across both months, the newspapers published a total of 18 special features that foregrounded the conflicts originating in Chinnakanal and their wider spread across Kerala. These features incorporated perspectives from affected residents, political actors, and wildlife experts, situating the conflict within broader socio-environmental contexts.

Coverage of *Arikomban* in Malayalam newspapers extends beyond event-based reporting to a broader engagement with human–animal conflict (HAC) in Kerala. Rather than treating the tusker as an isolated case, both newspapers position *Arikomban* as a thematic anchor through which legal, ethical, and ecological debates surrounding HAC are articulated. He emerges as a symbolic figure at the center of litigation, animal rights discourse, and public contestation. As activist Sreedevi S. Kartha observes, *Arikomban* has come to represent resilience in the face of perceived injustice, particularly the physical and psychological trauma associated with elephant translocation.

At the same time, newspaper narratives frequently foreground numerical claims regarding casualties and property damage. Reports attribute between seven and over ten human deaths to the tusker and emphasize the large-scale destruction of buildings and agricultural land. Discrepancies exist between figures reported by Malayala Manorama and Mathrubhumi, and neither newspaper nor official sources provides verifiable evidence directly linking the elephant to human fatalities. The experiential dimensions of the elephant’s suffering - its stress, injury, and disorientation - are largely absent from this coverage.

Most conflict-related reports adopt a hard-news format, offering continuous, event-driven updates with limited contextual processing. Between mid-April and the end of May 2023, both newspapers published near-daily reports on *Arikomban*, framing him as an emblematic figure of human–wildlife conflict. While this sustained coverage integrates political, administrative, and cultural developments, several reports rely on speculation and anticipatory narratives rather than confirmed facts. Articles predicting capture, identifying relocation sites, and detailing covert operations frequently appeared despite the Kerala High Court’s restrictions on disclosure. These speculative reports reveal instances of narrative bias and journalistic overreach. Despite such limitations, the newspapers maintain a formal and restrained tone, marked by careful diction, complex sentence structures, and an effort to balance authority with narrative engagement. Linguistically, the coverage reflects professional competence and rhetorical sophistication in navigating a polarising issue.

Framing in Newspaper Narratives

a. Texts

Headlines play a crucial role in establishing interpretive frames by highlighting selected aspects of reality while downplaying others. In the coverage of *Arikomban*, Malayalam newspapers used headlines not merely as summaries but as framing devices that guided reader interpretation through fear, blame, authority critique, and sensational appeal, even before the article text was read.

A dominant strategy was fear-framing, in which headlines portrayed the tusker as an expanding, immediate threat. Examples such as *“Ari’shikkomban shakes Cumbum”* (Mathrubhumi, May 28), *“Arikomban destroyed the kitchen of the house”* (Malayala Manorama, April 7), and *“Arikomban starts his ‘work’ in Tamil Nadu”* (Manorama, May 9) rely on action-oriented verbs that imply intention and aggression. This linguistic choice constructs the elephant as an active agent of violence, heightening anxiety and reinforcing perceptions of danger.

Closely linked to this is the blame frame, in which responsibility for the conflict is attributed to the animal and coercive intervention is normalized. Headlines such as *“Arikomban will be captured today or tomorrow”* (Manorama, April 27), *“Gun fired; run and hide”* (Mathrubhumi, May 1), and *“If Arikomban comes back, we will force him to run back”* (Manorama, May 4) frame capture and force as necessary responses, marginalizing ecological and administrative explanations.

In contrast, the authority critique frame redirects attention toward governance failures and institutional uncertainty. Headlines including *“Arikomban mission uncertain?”* (Manorama, April 10), *“The radio collar is not working correctly”* (Mathrubhumi, May 28), and *“Can Tamil Nadu put Arikomban in a cage?”* (Mathrubhumi, May 28) foreground administrative inefficiency and ethical ambiguity, shifting culpability from the animal to state agencies.

A further framing strategy is sensationalization, where emotional resonance and novelty take precedence over informational value. Headlines such as *“Online fund tracing for buying rice for ‘Arikomban’”* (Manorama, May 23) and *“There are issues even after translocating Arikomban; people say other elephants are violent”* (Mathrubhumi, May 2) echo the logic of digital memes, privileging affect and shareability.

Finally, special-feature headlines offer narrative and spatial framing. Titles like “*Route Map of Arikomban*” (Mathrubhumi, May 28), “*Without flinching and without missing*” (Mathrubhumi, May 7), and “*Chakkakkomban is coming...*” (Manorama, May 7) transform the conflict into a journey or spectacle, inviting reader identification rather than policy reflection.

Taken together, these headline patterns demonstrate that framing is systematically established at the headline level. Through fear, blame, critique, and sensationalism, headlines function as memetic frames that simplify complex human–animal conflicts and structure public understanding prior to engagement with the news text. Visual Framing: Images, Illustrations, and Cartoons

b. Visual elements

Visual elements in the coverage of *Arikomban* play a significant role in establishing frames of conflict, displacement, and symbolism. Photographs and illustrations consistently foreground material damage and emotional intensity. Images of demolished houses and affected settlements emphasize human loss, while close-up photographs of the tusker visually construct *Arikomban* as both powerful and distressed, reinforcing a tragic conflict frame. Infographics further consolidate this framing by spatializing the conflict. Malayala Manorama’s illustration “*The Route Map of Arikomban*” (May 28) visually traces the elephant’s movement from Chinnakanal into Tamil Nadu. By mapping territorial movement across regions, the graphic frames the conflict as one of displacement and habitat pressure rather than isolated incidents.

Cartoons significantly extend the visual framing by transforming *Arikomban* into a recurring political metaphor. In Manorama, a May 23 cartoon depicts the tusker carrying money-filled luggage under the caption “*Good days will come,*” framing corruption through animal symbolism. Another cartoon (April 1) represents *Arikomban* as a Congress leader in the context of the Karnataka Assembly elections, using the elephant to visualize electoral competition.

Mathrubhumi employs similar visual strategies. A May 14 cartoon portrays “*Laharikomban,*” linking the tusker’s popularity to concerns about drug abuse in Kerala. In another election-related cartoon, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is depicted as *Arikomban* being transported out of Karnataka, with Siddaramaiah

and Sonia Gandhi presented as Chakkakomban figures, framing political transition through familiar animal imagery. A May 7 cartoon further depicts Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala as *Arikomban* and V.D. Satheeshan as *Chakkakomban*, visually narrating intra-party power dynamics.

Across both newspapers, visual framing repeatedly anthropomorphizes *Arikomban*, casting the elephant as a victim, a hero, or a dominant actor, depending on the context. These representations shift attention away from ecological and structural causes of human–wildlife conflict and reinforce emotionally resonant, memetic interpretations. The findings indicate that visual elements serve as powerful framing tools, simplifying complex conflicts and enabling the circulation of *Arikomban* as a cultural and political icon.

Framing in Social Media Narratives

In accordance with the research design, the Hashtag analysis was conducted by filtering the collected posts locally. It helps to systematically identify high-visibility Facebook content related to the *Arikomban* human–animal conflict. Using “*Arikomban*” as the primary keyword, posts published between April 1 and May 31, 2023, were retrieved and ranked based on engagement metrics, including total interactions (likes, shares, comments, and reactions). From this dataset, the top 50 posts were purposively selected for qualitative analysis to capture dominant and widely circulated narratives rather than the full content volume.

Since March 2023, more than 27,000 Facebook posts carrying the hashtag *#Arikomban* have circulated, far exceeding the visibility accorded to human–animal conflict in general. This disproportionate attention is striking, given that *Arikomban* represents just one elephant among the 22,446 wild elephants recorded in India under the All-India Synchronous Elephant Estimation, released by the Wildlife Institute of India. The data suggest that *Arikomban*’s prominence is not driven by ecological significance but by memetic circulation on social media.

The most visible posts identified through keyword search and engagement ranking consistently frame the tusker through popular culture tropes. High-ranking content includes videos portraying *Arikomban* as a superhero, posts speculating on his suitability for film stardom or political office, and comedic adaptations drawn

from television sitcoms. These posts recontextualize the conflict as entertainment, shifting attention away from structural causes such as habitat loss, policy failures, and mitigation gaps.

Engagement metrics further reveal a strong preference for sensational and harmful framing. Posts emphasizing violence, threats, and destruction attracted significantly more likes, shares, and comments than posts with fact-based or contextual explanations. This pattern aligns with established findings on negativity bias in media attention, wherein adverse events and conflict-oriented narratives receive greater visibility and circulation. Consequently, sensational representations of *Arikomban* dominate the social media discourse, while scientifically grounded or mitigation-oriented narratives remain marginal.

The analysis also indicates that social media discourse frequently polarises the conflict. Activist-driven posts often frame forest officials, administrators, and policymakers as either incompetent or malicious, contributing to mistrust or misinformation. Unlike newspaper content, which is subject to editorial scrutiny and correction, social media posts circulate with minimal verification, allowing unchecked proliferation of speculative, exaggerated, or emotionally charged narratives.

Discussion

Intermedia Influence of Social Media on Newspaper Narratives

The findings of this study demonstrate a clear intermedia relationship between social media discourse and newspaper framing in the coverage of the *Arikomban* human–animal conflict. Rather than operating as independent agenda-setters, newspapers increasingly engage with, adapt to, and respond to narratives circulating on social media platforms, particularly those structured through digital memes.

A central outcome of this interaction is the anthropomorphization of the wild tusk. Social media memes portraying *Arikomban* as intelligent, food-loving, humorous, or heroic circulated widely before and during peak newspaper coverage. These representations were subsequently reflected in newspaper narratives through the consistent use of the meme-given name “*Arikomban*,”

the attribution of motives and intentions to the animal, and storylines that framed the conflict as an unfolding saga rather than an isolated ecological incident. Newspaper headlines such as “*Arikomban Strikes Again*” functioned as narrative entry points, signaling continuity with an already familiar digital character.

Newspaper framing also reveals the absorption of meme logic into journalistic storytelling. Articles increasingly contextualize incidents within broader cause-and-effect frameworks - explaining habitat loss, administrative failure, and mitigation challenges - while simultaneously retaining episodic storytelling centered on the elephant’s movements and actions. This hybrid narrative structure reflects an attempt to balance professional norms with audience expectations shaped by social media consumption.

Visual storytelling further illustrates this convergence. The frequent use of infographics, route maps, cartoons, and simplified explainers mirrors the meme’s ability to condense complex issues into easily recognizable visual forms. Such elements suggest that newspapers are consciously adopting formats that resonate with digitally native audiences accustomed to rapid, visual communication.

Crucially, newspapers have also served as intermediaries between online sentiment and institutional responses. Reports frequently cited public outrage, viral content, and social media debates to legitimize their coverage and pressure authorities. In this sense, social media trends increasingly serve as indicators of issue salience, influencing editorial priorities and framing decisions.

Conclusion

This study establishes that the bandwagon effect generated by digital memes decisively shapes newspaper narratives of human–animal conflict. In a media environment driven by visibility and engagement metrics, social media popularity increasingly determines what becomes newsworthy. Likes, shares, comments, and trending hashtags function as informal agenda-setting mechanisms, compelling newspapers to follow narratives already circulating in the digital public sphere.

The impact of this shift is twofold. Newspapers face economic and competitive pressures to prioritize viral stories, often resulting in click-oriented headlines, sensational framing, and reactive journalism. In such cases, editorial judgment risks being subordinated to digital popularity, contributing to the erosion of traditional gatekeeping roles and a dilution of investigative depth.

On the other hand, the bandwagon effect also offers opportunities. Social media can surface ground-level issues, provide early signals of public concern, and enable newspapers to reach broader and younger audiences. Viral content has prompted newspapers to allocate resources to significant events that may otherwise have remained marginal, allowing professional journalism to step in with verification, context, and expert analysis.

Importantly, newspapers continue to serve a critical corrective function by explaining and verifying digital narratives. Through long-form features, fact-checking initiatives, and investigative reporting, newspapers counter the distortions inherent in meme-driven discourse. In doing so, they attempt to reclaim epistemic authority within a fragmented information ecosystem.

In the context of human–wildlife conflict, however, this tension is particularly consequential. Meme-driven anthropomorphization and polarisation risk oversimplifying ecological realities and obscuring structural causes such as habitat encroachment and governance failures. The findings suggest that while newspapers have adapted to digital cultures to remain relevant, sustaining nuanced, science-informed, and ethically grounded coverage remains a critical challenge. The future of responsible HAC reporting lies not in resisting digital influence altogether, but in strategically mediating it without surrendering editorial integrity.

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