Research Article

Laughing in Cyberspace:
The Communicative Power of Memes on Social Media

Hammassa Zahara Ziza Yan[1*], Nessa Valentina Febrianti[2]

[1,2] *Linguistik Indonesia, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial, Budaya, dan Politik,*
Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Indonesia
*Correspondence Author, E-mail: 24046010014@student.upnjatim.ac.id

Abstract

Background: The development of digital technology has transformed the way people communicate, one of which is through the spread of humor on social media. Memes, as a popular form of digital expression, combine simple text and images yet can simultaneously create humor and convey social messages. This phenomenon is worth studying because memes are not merely a form of entertainment but also a medium of communication that reflects people's mindsets and digital culture. Purpose: This research aims to analyze the role of memes in delivering digital humor on social media, identify the humor strategies used in memes, and examine how memes influence audience interaction and responses. Method: The study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with content analysis techniques. The data consist of meme images collected from social media platforms such as Instagram, X (Twitter), and TikTok. The selected memes were analyzed based on visual content, text, and the context of humor displayed. Results: The findings show that memes play a significant role as a means of digital humor because they are easy to understand, spread rapidly, and can adapt to current issues. The dominant humor strategies include irony, satire, and wordplay that evoke emotional engagement from the audience. Conclusion: Memes are not only entertaining but also serve as an effective medium of digital communication that reflects social phenomena, fosters interpersonal connection, and strengthens the culture of humor in cyberspace.

Keywords: meme, digital humor, social media, communication, popular culture

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has brought profound changes in how Indonesian society communicates, particularly through the use of social media platforms, which have become the primary space for millions of people to interact, share information, and express themselves. According to (Nasrullah, 2019), social media has shifted traditional, direct forms of communication into modern, digital, and globally connected ones. Among the many new forms of communication emerging in the digital world, memes are one of the most popular and widely used by internet users. Memes are often employed to deliver humor digitally in creative and easily digestible ways (Wijaya, A., & Sari, 2020). A meme itself is a unit of cultural information that can be easily replicated, modified, and disseminated to a vast audience in a short time. Because of

this unique nature, memes have become an important phenomenon in digital communication that deserves serious academic attention (Pratama, 2021).

Digital technology in Indonesia has shown a rapid upward trend over the years. Data from (Rahayu, S., & Indrawati, 2022) ndicate that internet penetration in Indonesia reached more than 200 million users by 2023, meaning that most Indonesians now have internet access. This creates a broad and dynamic digital space where people can exchange information quickly and massively without spatial or temporal limits. One of the most consumed and frequently shared types of content in this digital space is humor in the form of memes. Memes spread quickly and have become part of the daily consumption of millions of internet users across Indonesia (Sartika, 2019). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (now known as X), TikTok, and Facebook are the primary spaces where memes are created, shared, and consumed widely (Permatasari, D., & Kurnia, 2021)

Memes are characterized by their ability to combine visuals and short text to convey humorous messages effectively. (Fitriani, 2020) notes that the simple yet meaningful structure of memes allows them to be accepted across various social and demographic backgrounds. With this characteristic, memes can be considered a universal language of digital communication that transcends social and geographical boundaries (Widodo, 2023).This phenomenon has attracted researchers' attention because memes serve not only as entertainment but also as tools for social criticism, identity expression, and even public opinion formation ((Maharani, K., & Pratiwi, 2019).

In digital communication, humor plays a key role in attracting audiences and building more personal connections. (Kusuma, 2023) explains that memes employ different humor techniques, such as irony, satire, parody, wordplay, and hyperbole, adjusted to social and cultural contexts. These humor strategies make memes not only funny and entertaining but also more intimate forms of communication between creators and followers (Nugroho, A. & Setiawan, 2020; Saputri, 2022). Thus, memes function as social glue, strengthening relationships in the digital world.

Previous research has shown that memes have a remarkable ability to spread quickly on social media a phenomenon known as virality (Handayani, 2019). Memes are flexible and adaptive, able to adjust to ongoing social, political, or cultural issues. Therefore, memes are often viewed as barometers that reflect the dynamics of digital society (Adriansyah, R., 2021). Moreover, memes play an important role in forming virtual communities whose members share humor and cultural understanding, creating strong group identities (Lestari, 2023).

Another unique feature of memes l ies in their interactivity, which differs significantly from one-way traditional media (Rahman, F., & Siska, 2020). In today's digital environment, users are no longer passive consumers; they are also active producers who can modify, remix, or recreate memes to fit their style, context, or message. This process forms what is known as "remix culture," a participatory culture in which content is collectively reshaped and shared. This shows that memes are not only entertainment but also democratized media that empower everyone to create and distribute content without formal (Dewi, 2021; Putra, I., & Anggraeni, 2022).

From a sociological perspective, memes can be viewed as reflections of the zeitgeist of Indonesia's digital society (Wibowo, 2019). Meme content often touches on current social, political, and cultural issues, processed humorously so messages are easily understood by all audiences. The humorous presentation makes memes engaging and widely shared, as people feel both entertained and connected (Santoso, J., & Fitriana, 2024). Thus, memes are not mere entertainment but important digital cultural artifacts. Studying them provides deeper

insight into how Indonesian society responds to current issues and how digital identity and culture continuously evolve (Indria, 2021)

However, within academic discourse, there remains ongoing debate regarding the primary function of memes in the digital ecosystem. On one hand, several scholars view memes as a form of entertainment and social bonding that strengthens solidarity within virtual communities (Pratiwi, 2023). On the other hand, more critical studies interpret memes as tools of social and political critique capable of deconstructing dominant narratives through subversive humor (Wijayanto, 2024). Furthermore, debates also arise concerning the impact of memes on the quality of public discourse: do memes simplify complex issues to make them more accessible, or do they instead contribute to the shallowing of social discussions (Rahmawati, D., & Nugroho, 2023) This study seeks to bridge these perspectives by examining how digital humor through memes functions communicatively on Indonesian social media not only as entertainment, but also as a dynamic medium for social reflection.

This study employs a multimodal discourse analysis approach to understand how memes integrate visual and textual elements in creating humorous meaning. This approach is relevant because memes cannot be interpreted solely through their text or image, but rather through the interaction between the two that constructs a communicative message (Putri, A., & Maharani, 2022). In addition, the study adopts the concept of participatory culture proposed by Jenkins (2009), which explains how digital audiences are no longer passive but actively engage in producing, modifying, and distributing content. In the context of Indonesian memes, this participatory culture is evident in the phenomena of remixing and adapting memes to local contexts (Hidayat, R., & Firmansyah, 2023). Furthermore, to understand humor strategies in memes, the study refers to the incongruity theory of humor, which emphasizes the mismatch between expectation and reality as the source of amusement (Sari, N., & Wulandari, 2021). This theoretical framework helps analyze not only the structure of memes but also the social and cultural processes that surround them

Most previous studies tend to highlight memes merely as an entertainment phenomenon, focusing on visual aesthetics and viral dissemination, while their ideological and participatory dimensions remain underexplored within the Indonesian context. These studies also tend to adopt a descriptive approach without critically analyzing how memes operate as a site of contestation for meaning and social identity (Aminah, S., & Rochman, 2022). In addition, earlier research has paid little attention to how Indonesia's local sociocultural context influences the production and interpretation of memes, even though humor is inherently contextual and cultural (Fauzi, A. & Permana, 2023). This research gap also includes the lack of analysis on the rhetorical strategies employed by meme creators to convey social messages through humor (Wulandari, 2024). Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining humor strategies alongside the surrounding sociocultural context, viewing memes as a communicative practice that is far more complex than mere digital entertainment

The urgency of this research lies in the growing role of digital humor in shaping public opinion in Indonesia, particularly when memes are used to respond to social, political, and cultural issues in ways that are lighthearted yet critical (Hasanah, U., & Iskandar, 2023). In recent years, memes have become an integral part of Indonesia's digital literacy, often serving as the first response to viral events or controversial policies (Suryana, D., & Pratama, 2024). This phenomenon indicates that memes are not merely a form of entertainment but also a tool for negotiating social meanings that reflect the collective consciousness of the digital generation (Indah, P., & Puspita, 2022). Moreover, in Indonesia's multicultural context, memes function as a medium of hybrid identity expression, blending global references with local elements such as regional languages, cultural idioms, and domestic issues. However, this

phenomenon has not been widely examined academically within the scope of Indonesian digital communication, particularly from linguistic and cultural perspectives. Therefore, this study is relevant for understanding the dynamics of digital humor communication as part of the transformation of Indonesia's communication culture in the social media era.

Based on these phenomena, this research aims to analyze how memes function as effective digital humor media across social platforms, particularly in the Indonesian context. The study seeks not only to understand how memes are created and spread but also how they influence communication patterns, social interactions, and emotional connections among users. The results are expected to contribute to communication studies by providing new perspectives on the dynamics of digital interaction in the modern era.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to gain a deep understanding of memes' role in conveying humor on social media. This method allows the researcher to explore meanings, contexts, and humor strategies embedded in digital memes. The primary data sources are memes collected from Instagram, X (Twitter), and TikTok three of Indonesia's most widely used platforms. Data collection was conducted through digital documentation of meme images. The number of memes analyzed was determined until data saturation, meaning no new patterns emerged.

Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis, involving data reduction (selecting relevant memes), categorization (grouping memes by humor type such as irony, satire, or linguistic play), and interpretation (analyzing both text and visuals). The study also analyzed social context to examine how memes represent social phenomena and how audiences respond online. To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied by comparing data across the three platforms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The role of memes in digital humor

Memes play a crucial role in shaping digital humor across social media. As entertainment, memes evoke laughter and joy through simple combinations of images and brief, relatable text. Due to their format, memes spread rapidly and attract attention, especially from users with limited time. Beyond entertainment, memes also serve as effective tools for social communication. Many users employ memes to express feelings or experiences that might be difficult to articulate directly such as frustrations about college, work, or daily struggles.

Memes also mirror the evolving digital culture. They often feature slang, trending topics, and references to current events, acting as records of public sentiment. Some memes also serve as tools of social or political critique, using humor to express serious messages in a lighthearted tone, making them easier for audiences to accept.

Memes foster online community bonds as well. When users find a meme relatable, they share it with friends or groups, creating a sense of belonging and shared experience. Thus, memes are not only humorous but also strengthen social interaction and build a distinct culture of digital humor.

Humor Strategies in Memes

The humor in memes typically relies on the creator's ability to combine text, image, and context. Common strategies include irony, satire, and wordplay, as illustrated in the research data:

1. Irony memes

a) Literal meaning: The situation in Bikini Bottom is chaotic (fires everywhere), captioned as "our finances." In the middle of that chaos, SpongeBob says, "let's grab some snacks," and Patrick replies, "let's go."
b) Connotative meaning: This meme satirizes people who, even when their financial situation is a mess, still have the urge to spend money or go shopping — and their friends eagerly agree without thinking.
c) Social function: A humorous critique of the consumptive lifestyle and the "YOLO" (you only live once) mindset, despite being in poor financial condition.

a) Literal meaning: The text says that taking a shower can make you feel refreshed and prevent drowsiness, but the image shows Jerry sleeping soundly after taking a bath.
b) Connotative meaning: This meme reflects a common everyday experience while the theory says that showering makes you more alert, in reality, for some people, it actually relaxes the body and makes them even sleepier.
c) Social function: It illustrates a reality that contrasts with common advice, making people who've had the same experience think, "that's so me."

a) Literal meaning: The phrase "It's okay, I'm fine" is shown on the outside (aswhat the person says), while inside their mind, they're actually screaming in panic, "AAAHHH!"
b) Connotative meaning: This meme satirizes the difference between what people say and what they truly feel. Even though someone might say "I'm fine" or "don't worry," deep down they're actually panicking, angry, or emotionally overwhelmed.
c) Social function: It highlights the phenomenon of masking emotions hiding one's true feelings presented humorously so it feels relatable and easy to understand.

2. Satire memes

a) Literal meaning: Stupidity doesn't cost anything (it's free), but someone is seen as having taken too much of it.
b) Connotative meaning: This tweet is a form of sarcasm. The writer mocks someone perceived as extremely foolish as if stupidity were a free item, and that person greedily took more than their fair share.
c) Social function: A sarcastic expression used to criticize or ridicule someone's

a) Literal meaning: It compares someone's brain to being only the size of half a spoon of the snack Nyam Nyam, which is obviously very small.

    b) Connotative meaning: This is a sarcastic remark aimed at someone considered foolish or lacking critical thinking. The writer uses a humorous metaphor (half a spoon of Nyam Nyam) to illustrate how little logic or intelligence the person seems to have.

    c) Social function: A mix of sarcasm and humor used to criticize someone in a funny, lighthearted way rather than in a harsh or offensive manner.

    a) Literal meaning: It likens someone's brain to being only the size of half a spoon of the snack Nyam Nyam, which is, of course, very small.

    b) Connotative meaning: This is a sarcastic expression directed at someone perceived as foolish or lacking foresight. The writer uses a funny metaphor (half a spoon of Nyam Nyam) to illustrate how little logic or intelligence the person seems to have.

    c) Social function: A blend of sarcasm and humor used to criticize or mock someone in a playful, amusing way rather than in a harsh or direct manner.

3. Cute abbreviation

    a) Denotative meaning (literal): The meme uses the abbreviation "HTS," which in everyday language usually stands for "Hubungan Tanpa Status" (a relationship without a label). However, in the meme's context, "HTS" is reinterpreted as "Harus Tetap Sholat" ("Must Keep Praying").

    b) Connotative meaning (implicit): The meme carries both a religious and humorous message. By playfully redefining a popular slang abbreviation among young people, the creator delivers a moral reminder that no matter the situation, humans still have the fundamental duty to worship. The humor comes from the wordplay — turning a term usually related to romance into a spiritual reminder.

c) Social function: Besides serving as entertainment, this meme also acts as a light form of dakwah (religious outreach). Using language familiar to young audiences makes the religious message easier to accept without sounding preachy.

a) Denotative meaning: The abbreviation "TGIF" usually stands for "Thank God It's Friday" an expression of joy because the weekend is coming. In this meme, however, the abbreviation is humorously reinterpreted as "Tolong Gusti I'm Frustrated" ("Please, Lord, I'm frustrated").

b) Connotative meaning: The meme uses humor through irony. Normally, "TGIF" expresses happiness, but here it's twisted into an expression of despair. The joke lies in the playful blend of English and Indonesian Javanese ("Gusti," meaning "Lord"), creating a comedic contrast between the expected cheerful tone and the frustrated meaning.

c) Social function: The meme conveys feelings of exhaustion, frustration, or burnout that many people experience toward the end of the week. Through humor, it turns negative emotions into something relatable and entertaining serving as both a form of catharsis and shared amusement.

a) Denotative meaning: The abbreviation "TGIF" usually stands for "Thank God It's Friday" an expression of joy because the weekend is coming. In this meme, however, the abbreviation is humorously reinterpreted as "Tolong Gusti I'm Frustrated" ("Please, Lord, I'm frustrated").

   b) Connotative meaning: The meme uses humor through irony. Normally, "TGIF" expresses happiness, but here it's twisted into an expression of despair. The joke lies in the playful blend of English and Indonesian Javanese ("Gusti," meaning "Lord"), creating a comedic contrast between the expected cheerful tone and the frustrated meaning.
   c) Social function: The meme conveys feelings of exhaustion, frustration, or burnout that many people experience toward the end of the week. Through humor, it turns negative emotions into something relatable and entertaining serving as both a form of catharsis and shared amusement.

Impact of Memes on Audiences and Social Interaction

Memes influence how people express humor and emotion in digital communication. Their simple format allows quick comprehension and widespread circulation. They help users voice emotions and everyday experiences while connecting through shared humor. Memes also serve as mirrors of society, depicting language trends, viral phenomena, and current affairs.

Furthermore, memes strengthen community ties users who identify with a meme's message often feel emotionally validated and connected to others who share similar experiences. In this way, memes function as social bonding tools, promoting a collective sense of humor in digital culture.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that memes play a crucial role in shaping digital humor and public discourse on social media. By combining text and visuals, memes convey social, cultural, and emotional messages in accessible ways. Beyond entertainment, they function as reflective media that represent current issues and foster online communities. Users actively produce and reinterpret content, showing the participatory nature of digital culture. The findings also hold practical value for digital literacy education, communication strategies, and policy development. Overall, memes serve as both creative expressions and communicative tools that mirror Indonesia's evolving digital culture

REFERENCES

Adriansyah, R., & W. (2021). Meme sebagai representasi kritik sosial di media sosial Instagram. *Jurnal Komunikasi Digital*, *6 (2)*, 145–162.

Aminah, S., & Rochman, F. (2022). Meme sebagai arena kontesasi identitas digital generasi Z indonesia. *Jurnal Komunikasi Kontemporer*, *9 (2)*, 134–149.

Dewi, A. (2021). Fenomena remix culture dalam produksi meme di platform TikTok. *Jurnal Media Dan Komunikasii*, *8 (1)*, 78–93.

Fauzi, A. & Permana, R. (2023). Kontekstualisasi humor lokal dalam meme Indonesia: Analisis semiotika budaya. *Jurnal Semiotika Dan Komunikasi*, *12 (1)*, 45–63.

Fitriani, L. (2020). Analisis semiotika meme sebagai bentuk komunikasi visual di era digital. *Jurnal Desain Komunikasi Visual*, *5(3)*, 201–218.

Handayani, R. (2019). Viralitas konten meme dalam ekosistem media sosial indonesia. *Jurnal Teknologi Komunikasi*, *4 (2)*, 112–128.

Hasanah, U., & Iskandar, T. (2023). Peran meme dalam diskursus politik digital indonesia pasca pemilu 2024. *Jurnal Komunikasi Politik*, *10 (3)*, 201–218.

Hidayat, R., & Firmansyah, A. (2023). Remix culture dan adaptasi meme: Studi etnografi virtual pada komunitas meme indonesia. *Jurnal Antropologi Digital, 7 (2)*, 156–174.

Indah, P., & Puspita, D. (2022). Meme sebagai cermin kesadaran kolektif generasi digital indonesia. *Jurnal Sodiologi Media, 11 (2)*, 89–107.

Indria, M. (2021). Meme sebagai artefak budaya digital: studi etnografi virtual. *Jurnal Antropologi Digital, 3 (1)*, 45–67.

Kusuma, A. W. (2023). Prevalensi toxic positivity pada mahasiswa: Studi deskriptif di Jakarta. *Indonesian Psychological Research, 5(2)*, 112–128.

Lestari, P. (2023). Pembetukan komunitas virtual melalui shared humor dalam meme culture. *Jurnal Sosiologi Digital, 7 (1)*, 156–173.

Maharani, K., & Pratiwi, D. (2019). Meme sebagai medium ekspresi identitas generasi milenial. *Jurnal Studi Generasi, 2 (2)*, 156--173.

Nasrullah, R. (2019). Transformasi komunikasi di era digital: Perspektif media baru. *Jurnal Komunikasi Indonesia, 12 (1)*, 34–52.

Nugroho, A. & Setiawan, B. (2020). Strategi humor lokal dalam meme Indonesia: Analisis konteks budaya. *Jurnal Budaya Digital, 4 (3)*, 267–284.

Permatasari, D., & Kurnia, N. (2021). Platform media sosial sebagai ruang produksi dan distribusi meme. *Jurnal Media Sosial, 6 (1)*, 89–106.

Pratama, H. (2021). Evolusi meme dalam komunikasi digital Indonesia. *Jurnal Komunikasi Kontemporer, 8 (1)*, 134–151.

Pratiwi, S. (2023). Solidaritas virtual melalui shared humor: studi kasus komunitas meme mahasiswa. *Jurnal Komunikasi Kelompok, 8 (1)*, 45–62.

Putra, I., & Anggraeni, L. (2022). Demokratisasi produksi konten melalui budaya meme di media sosial. *Jurnal Demokrasi Digital, 5 (2)*, 198–215.

Putri, A., & Maharani, K. (2022). Analisis multimodal pada meme politik indonesia. *Jurnal Wacana Dan Pragmatik, 10(2)*, 167–185.

Rahayu, S., & Indrawati, T. (2022). Penetrasi internet dan perubahan pola komunikasi masyarakat indonesia. *Jurnal Telematika, 11 (1)*, 67–84.

Rahman, F., & Siska, M. (2020). Interaktivitas dan partisipasi audiens dalam kultur meme digital. *Jurnal Partisipasi Media, 7 (3)*, 198–215.

Rahmawati, D., & Nugroho, E. (2023). Simplifikasi vs pendangkalan: Delima meme dalam diskursus publik digital. *Jurnal Komunikasi Publik, 12(1)*, 89–108.

Santoso, J., & Fitriana, A. (2024). Meme sebagai refleksi isu sosial politik kontemporer Indonesia. *Jurnal Politik Digital, 9 (1)*, 112–129.

Saputri, R. (2022). Intimasi dan personalitas dalam komunikasi meme di media sosial. *Jurnal Psikologi Komunikasi, 10 (2)*, 245–262.

Sari, N., & Wulandari, F. (2021). Teori inkongruennsi dalam humor digital: Aplikasi pada analisis meme indonesia. *Jurnal Linguistik Terapan, 13(2)*, 145–163.

Sartika, W. (2019). Fenomena viral da penyebaran informasi dalam kultur meme indonesia. *Jurnal Informasi Dan Komunikasi, 5 (3)*, 178–194.

Suryana, D., & Pratama, Y. (2024). Meme sebagai respons instan terhadap peristiwa viral di Indonesia. *Jurnal Komunikasi Digital, 12(1)*, 56–74.

Wibowo, S. (2019). Meme sebagai cermin zeitgest masyarakat digital indonesia. *Jurnal Sosiologi Komunikasi, 8 (1)*, 56–73.

Widodo, T. (2023). Semiotika visual dalam kontruksi makna meme digital. *Jurnal Semiotika Terapan, 6 (2)*, 301–318.

Wijaya, A., & Sari, N. (2020). Meme culture dan transformasi humor di era media sosial. *Jurnal Kajian Media, 7 (2)*, 123–140.

Wijayanto, R. (2024). Humor subversif dan resistensi digital: studi kasus meme kritik sosial di media sosial Indonesia. *Jurnal Komunikasi Politik Digital*, *11(2)*, 123–142.

Wulandari, T. (2024). Strategi retoris dalam meme: Analisis pragmatik pada konten humor digital indonesia. *Jurnal Pragmatik Indonesia*, *9(1)*, 67–86.