From Humour to Impact: Internet Memes in Political Discourse through (de)legitimization

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Abstract

Internet memes, as artifacts of digital culture, quickly spread political ideas and critiques, transcending traditional media. Despite their prevalence, understanding how memes use semiotic elements and (de)legitimization strategies to shape political narratives on social media is limited. This research investigates how semiotic representations and (de)legitimization processes materialize in political discourse through social media memes. Using Van Leeuwen's (2005, 2007) framework of social semiotics and (de)legitimization strategies, we analyzed the visual and textual elements of 47 memes collected from January to July 2024; we selected 11 memes that represent Van Leeuwen's (de)legitimization strategies. The study revealed that memes convey complex political messages using semiotic resources, including color, gesture, and text. Intertextuality, humor, irony, rationalization, and moral evaluation are commonly used to criticize or support political figures and ideologies. This highlights the dynamic role of social media in political communication, where memes rapidly influence public perception. The findings emphasize the importance of understanding semiotic and rhetorical strategies in political communication analysis. The study contributes to the discourse of digital political communication by showing how memes, as cultural artifacts, shape political narratives and legitimacy. The research has significant implications for political strategists, communicators, and academics interested in the intersection of media, politics, and culture.

Keywords: Internet memes, Political communication, Semiotics, (de)legitimization strategies, Social media.

Exploring the use of political imagery in unique memes, particularly the potent tools of humor and satire, is a compelling area of contemporary political communication. These elements, often found in political memes, wield significant power for (de)legitimization. Humor in political memes can effectively delegitimize opponents by portraying them as ridiculous or incompetent. Conversely, these memes can also legitimize candidates by presenting them as approachable and relatable. According to (Barthes, 1968), images possess connotative

meanings that extend beyond their denotative content, making them potent instruments in political communication (Niswa et al., 2023). For instance, a meme depicting a political candidate with exaggerated facial expressions or satirical elements can simultaneously convey criticism and ridicule, undermining the candidate's credibility and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the textual components of memes play a crucial role in (de)legitimation strategies. Fairclough (2013) emphasizes that language is a key site of power and ideological struggles. Memes frequently employ rhetorical devices such as irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole to succinctly and effectively convey political messages (Adegoju & Oyebode, 2015; Chesterman, 1997; Shifman, 2013a; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). For example, memes juxtaposing a politician's promises with contradictory actions use irony to delegitimize the politician's claims. Semiotic analysis of humor involves exploring the cultural and contextual factors that make certain jokes and satirical elements resonate with audiences.

Social media, a key player in shaping, influencing, and manipulating public opinion, is a topic of significant interest (Weeks et al., 2017; Xue et al., 2019). The ease of accessing information through these platforms fosters a more diverse range of public responses (Hampton et al., 2011). This study primarily focuses on the efficacy of digital communication, particularly in the context of (de)legitimization of political discourse. Social media users can swiftly disseminate political messages and influence public opinion through internet memes and viral visual content. However, the role of memefication in (de)legitimizing political discourse raises critical questions about truth, ethics, and its impact on democratic processes.

Semiotics is the study of signs, including how these signs are used to represent ideas, concepts, and reality within a communication context (Davis et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2014; Purba et al., 2023). In digital

communications, particularly the process of turning political discourse into memes, known as memefication, semiotic representations function as cultural artifacts on social media (Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). These artifacts reflect broader trends and shifts in how information is consumed, interpreted, and disseminated in contemporary society, such as the increasing reliance on visual communication and the blurring of boundaries between serious and humorous content (Gal et al., 2016; Watts, 2003; Wiggins, 2019)..

Transitioning to a current example, the controversy surrounding the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election has been particularly intense. Political tensions have escalated as candidates and their supporters engage in heated debates and campaigns. Accusations of election fraud, concerns about the impartiality of election officials, and the polarizing nature of the candidates have all fuelled public discord. This charged atmosphere of debate has permeated various levels of society, influencing public opinion and exacerbating divisions. Each election period sees an increasingly fraught political landscape, highlighting the critical need to understand the multifaceted forces shaping election outcomes and public perceptions (Rakhmyta et al., 2024).

Now, let us consider the concept of the "meme" within the digital culture framework. Traditionally defined as a cultural unit that spreads from person to person, memes have been debated long before the digital era (Milner, 2012; Neville, 2014; Shifman, 2013a). However, the Internet has dramatically amplified the visibility and spread of memes, embedding the term in the vernacular of netizens. As cultural artifacts, political memes both reflect and shape public discourse on social media (Shifman, 2013a; Watts, 1981; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). They capture the zeitgeist, embodying contemporary social and political sentiments. By utilizing humor, irony, and satire, memes address severe

issues in an accessible and appealing manner, thus reaching a broad audience.

Previous research on political discourse legitimacy and (de)legitimization has been conducted (Ananda & Sari, 2021; Harbo, 2022; Reyes, 2011; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Against this backdrop, the research discusses memes from a semiotic perspective, which operate at multiple levels of meaning. They use a combination of linguistic signs (text) and visual signs (images) to create multimodal messages (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Herman et al., 2022b). What makes this study different from previous research is that by using semiotic analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2005), this study seeks to understand how memes function as instruments of (de)legitimization (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

This study examines political memes that specifically use popular memes, overlaying them with text that provides commentary on political events or figures. The interaction between image and text creates a rich semiotic landscape that can convey complex messages engagingly. This research question boils down to the following:

• How do semiotic representations and (de)legitimization processes manifest in the digital communication of political discourse as a social media cultural artifact?

This research aims to contribute to existing research by exploring the intersection between semiotics and (de)legitimization in internet memes of political discourse in the context of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Internet Memes in Shaping Political Discourse

In the realm of social media, memes are often associated with viral videos, images, slogans, language, and strategic communication campaigns. However, the essence of a meme does not depend solely on its virality or specific attributes. Blackmore (2000) emphasizes that

most memes related to genes cannot be classified as viral; instead, they constitute the cognitive contents of our minds. This perspective underscores that memes are integral to social media networks.

Van Leeuwen (2005) explains that images and text can occupy the same space and be integrated (Herman et al., 2022a; Setiawati et al., 2024). Either the text is integrated into the image space – 'image integration' – or the image is integrated into the textual space – 'textual integration.' In the case of advertising, the integration of images absorbs the text into a dream or fantasy, minimizing the 'reality text' in tiny print. Conversely, textual integration absorbs the image into the real world, possibly showing only the advertised product or products rather than the entire scene (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

The efficacy of political discourse on social media has significant implications for political communication (Martinez-Rolán et al., 2016; Moreno-Almeida, 2021). This evolution changes the traditional dynamics of delivering and receiving messages, shifting power from elite gatekeepers (such as mainstream media) to ordinary users who can create and share content. These forms of political engagement are not just more participatory. They are a shift in power dynamics, posing challenges, such as spreading misinformation and the potential for echo chambers.

2.2. Semiotics and (de)legitimization strategies in Internet memes

Through the lens of semiotics, signs in memes, including images, texts, and their mutual relationships, are deciphered to reveal underlying messages that challenge or uphold societal norms and power structures (Berger, 2014; Shifman, 2013a; Wiggins, 2019; Herman et al., 2024). One of the main strategies in the process of (de)legitimization in memes is the use of intertextuality, as Bahtin in Ross & Rivers (2017) and Tsakona (2018), where memes reference and build on other cultural texts and symbols to create new meanings (Allen, 2011;

Vaara, 2014). For example, during political campaigns, meme creators create memes that mock a candidate's mistakes, or policies can spread quickly online, shaping public perception and significantly influencing voter behavior. By using semiotic elements such as incongruity, magnification, and parody (Berger, 2014), these memes create a space where audiences can question and criticize the legitimacy of political figures and institutions (Burgess & Green, 2018; Cannizzaro, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2017).

In every presidential election period, memes serve as a form of political commentary, allowing meme creators to express their support or criticism of candidates in a concise and impactful way (Shifman, 2013b; Van Leeuwen, 2005). By creating humorous content, meme creators engage audiences in ways that traditional political commentary may not be able to. This humor can undermine the authority and legitimacy of political figures, a strategy Van Leeuwen (2007) discussed as delegitimization through moral evaluation and rationalization. For example, memes exaggerating candidates' mistakes can reduce their credibility and highlight their perceived incompetence (Milner, 2013).

METHODS

This descriptive qualitative research explains the semiotic meaning of political memes on social media. The texts overlaid the meme images will be analyzed based on their (de)legitimacy, adopting Van Leeuwen's (2007) four-strategy discourse (de)legitimacy framework, namely, authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Qualitative methods are used to explain phenomena comprehensively (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maxwell, 2012; Munthe et al., 2024) to understand the social context, perceptions, and meanings contained in political memes. The semiotic approach is used to analyze the symbols and signs used in political memes and interpret their symbolic meanings in political

and cultural contexts (Gibbs Jr, 2015; Hussein & Aljamili, 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2005; Zittrain, 2014; Herman, Purba and Saputra, 2024cc).

This study has selected two specific Instagram accounts as data sources, including @komik_pinggiran, and @politicalmemes.id. Macro images in the form of memes are categorized as new media in shaping and spreading messages (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011). During the data collection period (January to July 2024), we independently collected several memes from the two Instagram accounts. We first collected memes directly related to the topics being discussed during the presidential and vice-presidential candidate debate period. Secondly, memes represented the (de)legitimization strategies outlined in Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework. We merged the samples after the data collection period ended, resulting in 47 memes. Out of the numerous memes collected, we have carefully selected 11 that most clearly represent Van Leeuwen's (2007) (de)legitimization strategies. The data were analyzed based on Van Leeuwen's (2007) (de)legitimization framework and semiotic theory to identify patterns, strategies, and symbolic meanings used in politically contextualized memes and those memes that effectively demonstrate the characteristics inherent in Internet image macro memes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research principally analyzes the semiotic representations and (de)legitimization processes manifest in the digital communication of political discourse as a social media cultural artifact. The common feature of each meme presented in this study is the recognition of familiar metaphors, which are easily interpretable and make the audience feel connected and involved. Many of these metaphors are recognizable to the internet generation, making the memes easier to interpret. The increased level of mimicry or remixing of the memes adds to the potential for humor in

adapting common memes to specific issue agendas.

4.1 Semiotics representation through (de)legitimization: rationalization

The meme in Figure 1 is a screenshot from an article titled "Beda Sikap dengan Jokowi, Wapres Ma'ruf Amin Tegaskan Dirinya Netral dan Tidak Memihak" (Different Attitude from Jokowi, Vice President Ma'ruf Amin Asserts His Neutrality and Impartiality). Under the caption is a photo of Ma'ruf Amin and two other people, all performing the "metal" hand pose (thumb, index, and little fingers straightened, middle and ring fingers down), seemingly referring to the number three.

The "metal" hand gesture is typically associated with rock culture, symbolizing rebellion or counterculture (Studdert-Kennedy, 1994). In this context, the gesture may seem out of place for a political figure, indicating a disconnection or irony. The headline, "Affirmation of Neutrality," contrasts Ma'ruf Amin's statement of neutrality with a hand gesture that could imply a certain contradiction or an attempt to appeal to a younger, perhaps more rebellious demographic. "Language-like gestures" are seamlessly integrated into spoken language, serving as a vital component that works harmoniously with verbal elements to communicate a complete message effectively (Morris, 1979; Studdert-Kennedy, 1994). These gestures are not just supplementary; instead, they are intricately woven into the structure of the spoken sentence, thereby exerting influence and enriching the overall meaning. As in Figure 1 the "metal" hand gesture is widely recognized in popular culture and is usually associated with nonconformity and rebellion. Its use by political figures can be seen as an attempt to connect with different cultural groups or to portray a more relatable and less formal image. The combination of the title and image creates a humorous or ironic effect. A serious assertion of neutrality is juxtaposed with a hand gesture that appears informal and out of character for a political leader, potentially calling into question the sincerity or appropriateness of the gesture in this context.

Figure 1. Example of (de)legitimization: rationalization

The (de)legitimization strategy of rationalization is particularly relevant to this meme. According to Van Leeuwen (2007), rationalization involves using logical arguments, reasons, or practical considerations to justify or criticize an action. In this case, juxtaposing a formal declaration of neutrality with an informal, culturally specific hand gesture creates a sense of irony. This contrast can be seen as questioning the rationality and seriousness of Ma'ruf Amin's stance, implying that his actions may not be entirely appropriate or consistent with his claimed impartiality.

Van Leeuwen's (2005, 2006) social semiotics analysis of irony further elucidates the impact of memes. Irony, as a semiotic tool, involves saying one thing and meaning another, often highlighting contradictions or criticizing subtly. The meme uses irony by combining a severe political statement with a culturally rebellious gesture, thus creating a layered message that undermines and mocks the politician's proclaimed neutrality. While moral evaluations may also be considered, as the image indirectly questions the appropriateness of the gesture in a political context, the main focus here is on logical inconsistencies and humorous and ironic contrasts rather than direct moral judgments. The rationalization (de)legitimation strategy subtly

criticizes the juxtaposition of formal political behavior with informal gestures, indicating a potential lack of seriousness or coherence in Ma'ruf Amin's public image. Through this dual lens of rationalization and irony, the meme effectively engages in political commentary, shaping public perception and influencing political discourse.

4.2 Semiotics representation through (de)legitimization: moral evaluation

Figure 2 features a meme categorized under moral evaluation. In the meme, Gibran gestures by raising his hand to his forehead as if shielding his eyes to see something in the distance. The text overlay reads, "MENCARI DIMANA LETAK DEBATNYA" (look for where the debate is). This text suggests a metaphorical search for the location or substance of the debate. The denotation here is the movement of protecting the eyes with the hand, typically to block light and see more clearly. In terms of connotation, the gesture in the meme humorously indicates that the substance or location of the debate is difficult to understand or find. This implies that debates, which should be prominent and clear, are elusive or hard to identify.

Figure 2. Examples of (de)legitimization: moral evaluation

Moral evaluation, a technique that involves the use of value-laden language to legitimize or delegitimize actions by appealing to shared moral values and norms, is employed in this meme (Van Leeuwen, 2018). The moral evaluation is evident in the direct accusation, "Gibran Bohong" (Gibran is lying). This phrase not only questions Gibran's honesty but also frames the situation as a moral failure. By labelling him a liar, the text provides a powerful

moral assessment of his character and the transparency of the information presented about the project. The meme thus delegitimizes Gibran's actions by appealing to the audience's sense of honesty and integrity, suggesting that he has violated these moral standards. Gibran's reliance on unnecessary gimmicks detracts from the substance of the discussion. Using such gimmicks during questioning and answering sessions diverts attention from meaningful discourse. It highlights his failure to answer questions directly. Instead of focusing on substantive ideas, Gibran resorts to tactics that insult his opponents and divert attention from the issues. This approach undermines the intellectual integrity of the debate and raises concerns about his seriousness as a potential leader. Although Gibran initially conveyed his ideas well, his performance could have improved during the question-and-answer session, emphasizing the need for substance over showmanship.

The text surrounding the meme Figure 2 criticizes the success of the government's food estate project in Gunung Mas, Central Kalimantan. Gibran's speech bubble humorously questions the gap between what is planted (cassava) and what is cultivated (corn), implying a mismatch or failure in the project. The larger text at the top questions the success of the food estate project, while the speech bubble directly suggests a contradiction. Social semiotics, the study of how signs and symbols create meaning within specific cultural contexts, is employed in this meme to convey irony and criticism (Van Leeuwen, 2005). The gesture of shielding his eyes while searching for the debate, coupled with the text questioning the location of the debate, creates a humorous and ironic effect. This irony serves to undermine Gibran's perceived seriousness and competence, suggesting that his actions are not aligned with his claims. The visual gesture combined with the textual criticism creates a complex multimodal message that leverages cultural knowledge and societal norms to convey its point effectively, making the

audience feel the depth and intricacy of the meme.

The red text at the bottom, "Gibran Bohong" (Gibran is lying), is a strong accusation implying fraud or misinformation about the project's success. Through the delegitimization strategy of rationalization, the criticism presented in the image is supported by logical arguments and evidence. The text describes soil problems (podsol, sandy) and the failure of the cassava crop, indicating that the project was flawed from the start. This appeals to reason and logic, illustrating why the project was not successful.

Figure 3. Examples of (de)legitimization: moral evaluation

The meme in Figure 3 features text above the image that reads, "Looking for lost ethics, who knows where." This combination of image and text suggests criticism of Gibran's behavior during the debate, implying he has lost his ethical behavior. The over-seeking attitude is a sarcastic comment on his performance. The humor and irony in the image highlight the perception that Gibran's use of gimmicks during the debate overshadowed ethical and substantive discourse. Moral evaluation (Van Leeuwen, 2007) is a strategy that involves delegitimizing actions by appealing to shared moral values and norms. In these memes, Gibran's ethical behavior during the debate is called into question. The text "SEDANG MENCARI ETIKA YANG HILANG ENTAH DIMANA" (Looking for lost ethics, who knows where?) directly critiques his moral integrity. This explicit questioning of ethics aligns with Van Leeuwen's concept of moral evaluation, as it uses shared societal values of honesty and integrity to undermine Gibran's legitimacy. The meme mocks Gibran for his lack of ethics during the debate. Semiotic elements,

such as searching gestures and ironic text, reinforce this criticism, indicating that his behavior is more focused on theatricality than maintaining ethical standards. Moral evaluation involves delegitimizing actions by referring to moral values, norms, and ethics, often judging someone's behavior based on ethical standards. Gibran faces criticism for not behaving ethically when debating. The text "Searching for lost ethics, somewhere" explicitly questions his moral integrity. The sarcastic nature of the gesture (seeking ethics) further highlights the moral judgment being made. The image's creator implies that Gibran's actions in the debate were ethically questionable, delegitimizing his performance on moral grounds. Social semiotics examines how signs and symbols create meaning within specific cultural contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005, 2006). The memes employ visual and textual elements to convey irony and criticism. Gibran's gesture of shielding his eyes, combined with the sarcastic text, creates a humorous and ironic effect that undermines his perceived seriousness and competence. This multimodal message leverages cultural knowledge and societal norms to deliver a pointed critique effectively.

The following meme features Gollum, a character from "The Lord of the Rings," in a pose with his hand raised to his forehead, seemingly shielding his eyes from the light or attempting to see something in the distance. This image, placed in the context of the Gollum character, carries significant connotations. Gollum is synonymous with moral corruption and obsessive behavior. The meme creator reinforces the negative moral evaluation initially suggested in the first image by comparing Gibran to Gollum. The second meme's use of Gollum deepens the criticism initiated by the first image. The image's creator intensifies the moral evaluation strategy by comparing Gibran to a character known for moral corruption and obsessive behavior. This comparison suggests that Gibran's actions in the debate were ethically questionable, compulsive,

and lacking integrity, much like Gollum in "The Lord of the Rings."

Both memes in Figure 3 show moral evaluations to delegitimize their subjects by highlighting negative moral or ethical characteristics. The Gibran meme, whose text implies he lacks ethics—an essential trait for a leader—questions his legitimacy. The association with the Gollum meme, depicting a morally corrupt and obsessive character, further emphasizes Gibran's lack of integrity. The memes effectively question Gibran's legitimacy as a political figure by highlighting ethical shortcomings and drawing comparisons to morally corrupt characters. This approach not only engages the audience humorously and ironically but also appeals to shared moral values, thereby enhancing the impact of the critique

4.3 Semiotics representation through (de)legitimization: authorization

Meme Figure 4 the upper part shows Indonesian President Joko Widodo (commonly called Pakde) speaking at a podium with the text above it saying, "Pakde minta gubernur, walikota, bupati untuk bersikap tidak memihak" (Pakde asks governors, mayors, and regents to act impartially). The bottom part shows Bobby Nasution, the Mayor of Medan, along with his wife, both holding up two fingers (a sign of victory or peace), with the text above it saying, "Wali Kota Medan Bobby Nasution mengunggah video sedang joget gemoy" (Medan Mayor Bobby Nasution uploaded a video of him dancing happily). Meme Figure 4 shows President Joko Widodo (signifier) signifying authority and leadership. His formal attire and atmosphere reinforce his official status and the importance of his message of impartiality in government (signified). Underneath, the image of Bobby Nasution (signifier) with his victory sign and dancing (signified) can convey a relaxed and carefree attitude, in stark contrast to the severe tone of President Jokowi's message. The use of bold text and the juxtaposition of images creates a multimodal text. The two

images' high color saturation and clear differentiation contribute to their interpretive framework. The stark contrast between formal and informal visual elements emphasizes the difference between the call for impartiality and the mayor's perceived actions.

Figure 4. Example of semiotic representation through (de)legitimization: authorization

However, the meme implicitly refers to a broader political narrative and discourse, which draws on shared cultural knowledge about the behavior and expectations of public officials. By combining the two images, the meme creator criticizes Bobby Nasution's actions regarding President Jokowi's directive. In the Figure 4, Bobby Nasution and his wife are seen making the V sign in front of the palm, seemingly referring to the number two. This gesture, characterized by the palm facing outward and the index and middle fingers extended to form a V, often signifies peace, victory, or positive sentiment. However, the back of the palm facing outward with the V sign can have different connotations in various cultural contexts, potentially leading to misinterpretation. This cultural implication adds another layer of meaning to the meme (Collett, 1982; Studdert-Kennedy, 1994). When analyzing memes featuring President Jokowi and Bobby Nasution within the framework of Van Leeuwen's (de)legitimization strategy, the most relevant (de)legitimization strategy is authorization. Due to his authority as President, the Jokowi meme above him is an authoritative figure, asking governors, mayors, and regents to

remain neutral. His position as President gives him the authority to make such a request, thus legitimizing the call for neutrality. In contrast, the bottom shows Bobby Nasution, the Mayor of Medan, appearing to oppose the request by performing actions that seem partial (dancing and showing the V sign). This creates a juxtaposition that challenges the authority and legitimacy of Jokowi's appeal. When linked to the (de)legitimization of moral evaluation, the meme implicitly questions the moral integrity of Bobby Nasution's actions by comparing them to Jokowi's call for impartiality. The moral tone suggests that as a public official, Nasution should uphold the values of neutrality and fairness. However, his actions are portrayed as contradicting these values.

With the effective (de)legitimization of authorization, the meme leverages President Jokowi's authority to set standards of conduct that Bobby Nasution appears to have violated. The meme uses the President's authority to highlight the inconsistencies in the behavior of low-ranking officials, thus questioning the legitimacy of Bobby's actions.

Figure 5. Example of semiotic representation through (de)legitimization: authorization

Next, the semiotic meaning in Figure 5 illustrates a group of Satpol PP officers holding pictures of political candidates. They pose together, with some giving a thumbs-up gesture. The title above reads: "Kades udah, Satpol PP udah. Gak sekalian panitianya deklarasi??" (The

head of the village is already done, Satpol PP is already done, why don't the committee declare as well?) The yellow text adds: "Ketika Aparat Yang Dibayar Negara Menjadi Timses Capres Cawapres" (When state-paid officers become campaign teams for presidential and vice-presidential candidates). The image's denotation includes officers, candidate images, and uniforms. The accompanying text criticizes the involvement of state-paid officials in political campaigns. The connotation of the uniforms indicates authority and official duties. At the same time, the images of the candidates represent political affiliation and support. Additionally, the thumbs-up gesture signals approval and support.

Regarding symbolism and cultural code, Satpol PP officers symbolize law enforcement and public order, while candidate images symbolize political propaganda. The thumbs-up gesture is typically used to show approval or support. Regarding myths, there is an underlying expectation that state officials, such as Satpol PP, must remain neutral and not get involved in political activities. This depiction challenges this myth by showing officers actively participating in political campaigns. The (de)legitimization strategy in Figure 5 also aligns closely with Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of moral evaluation. The image and accompanying text morally assess the actions of the Satpol PP officers, suggesting that it is unethical for state-funded officers to be involved in political campaigns. The text questions their neutrality and integrity, providing a precise moral evaluation of their behavior. The statement "When state-funded officers become the campaign team for presidential and vice-presidential candidates" conveys a strong moral message, indicating that this action is inappropriate and violates expected ethical standards.

While there is an element of the (de)legitimization strategy of authorization in questioning the proper use of authority by the Satpol PP officers, the main focus of this text is on the moral implications of their actions rather

than their legitimate authority. The image challenges the moral correctness of the officers' actions rather than their official power. The text provides some rationalization by explaining that state-paid officials must remain neutral. However, this rationalization supports moral evaluation rather than standing alone as a primary strategy. The mythopoesis of state officials' neutrality is highlighted. However, it is a moral evaluation that shows how their actions deviate from this ideal. As Van Leeuwen (2007) states moral evaluation is a strategy that involves delegitimizing actions by appealing to shared moral values and norms. In these memes, the Satpol PP officers' ethical behavior is questioned. The text "When state-paid officers become campaign teams for Presidential and vice-presidential candidates" directly critiques their moral integrity. This explicit questioning of ethics aligns with Van Leeuwen's concept of moral evaluation, as it uses shared societal values of honesty and integrity to undermine the officers' legitimacy.

Social semiotics examines how signs and symbols create meaning within specific cultural contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005, 2006). The memes employ visual and textual elements to convey irony and criticism. The officers' thumbs-up gesture, combined with the critical text, creates a humorous and ironic effect that undermines their perceived seriousness and competence. This multimodal message leverages cultural knowledge and societal norms to deliver a pointed critique effectively. To sum up, the meme in Figure 4 utilizes the delegitimization strategy of moral evaluation and social semiotics analysis to critique the Satpol PP officers' involvement in political campaigns. The meme effectively questions the officers' legitimacy by highlighting ethical shortcomings and drawing on cultural symbols of authority and neutrality. This approach not only engages the audience humorously and ironically but also appeals to shared moral values, thereby enhancing the impact of the critique.

4.4 Semiotics representation through (de)legitimization: rationalization

The scenario depicted in meme Figure 5 is humorous, considering the sense of impossibility it evokes. However, the real delegitimization occurred when, in 2016, the Mata Najwa program with the topic "Cerita Anak Jokowi" encouraged viewers to question their promises. In the meme in Figure 6, these promises are questioned again, implying they are based on fantasy rather than truth. Suppose the truth cannot be discovered, and the individual is depicted as engaging in fantasy. In that case, delegitimizing the individual and the idea is compelling. Both memes exploit ridicule through imitation, which is especially true of the second meme, which reflects the notion that "humor, ridicule, and satire are part of the overall architecture of delegitimization" (Davis et al., 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2017).

Figure 6. Examples of semiotics representation (de)legitimization: rationalization

The meme in Figure 6 shows a screenshot of a television show featuring President Joko Widodo's children (called "Anak Jokowi"). The text on the image is in Indonesian and translates to: "We have been living for a year (as children of the president), and it's just like this. We still sell martabak (a type of street food). The one who became the president is our father, while we are just the president's children." The meme can be linked to the concept of rationalization delegitimization. In the realm of rationalization strategies, delegitimization refers to the process of weakening the legitimacy or credibility of something or someone (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Rationalization involves creating logical explanations to justify behavior,

decisions, or circumstances. In this context, the children rationalize their usual lifestyle by emphasizing the differences between their father's role as president and their identity. They delegitimize any assumptions that their lives should be privileged or drastically different because of their father's status.

These meme statements function to manage public perception by presenting themselves as relatable and down-to-earth individuals. This goes against any narrative that they may have lived extremely privileged lives due to their father's position, thereby maintaining their credibility and connectedness in the eyes of the general public. The show on Metro TV entitled "Jokowi's Children's Stories" most likely aims to humanize the president's family, showing that they face the same challenges and live simply even though their father is president. These media depictions support rationalizing and delegitimizing any undue expectations or criticism. Delegitimization involves changing perceptions and beliefs to justify negative attitudes or actions toward a target group or individual. This often occurs during intense conflict and involves reinterpreting the target's behavior and characteristics to diminish their legitimacy and authority. This process can be seen in historical and contemporary examples where leaders or groups are labeled with negative stereotypes to justify opposition or exclusion (Bar-Tal, 1989; Tropp, 2012; Wright et al., 2017).

In the context of the 2024 Indonesian election, where the president's son is elected vice president, there is significant discussion around the rationalization of delegitimization. Meme Figure 6 may argue that their rise to power was due more to nepotism than merit, thereby attempting to undermine their legitimacy. The meme in Figure 6 features interviews with President Jokowi's children, discussing their lives and challenges. One of them mentioned continuing his business despite his father holding high office, implying an effort to maintain normalcy and independence. However, with

their recent election as vice president, this narrative may be changing, and they may face delegitimization efforts that suggest their positions are solely due to their father's influence. Rationalization involves providing logical explanations to justify actions or circumstances. The meme's narrative rationalizes the children's ordinary lifestyle by contrasting it with their father's role, suggesting that their lives remain unaffected by his presidency. This justifies their perceived normalcy and counters any assumptions of undue privilege. By presenting themselves as relatable, they manage public perception and maintain credibility, which aligns with Van Leeuwen's rationalization strategy of legitimization.

Social semiotics examines how signs and symbols create meaning within specific cultural contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005, 2007). The meme employs visual and textual elements to create irony and humor. The children's statement about selling martabak while their father is president juxtaposes the high-status role of their father with their ordinary activities, creating a humorous and ironic effect. This use of humor and irony effectively engages the audience, making the critique more relatable and impactful.

4.5 Semiotics representation through (de)legitimization: mythopoesis

Meme in Figure 7 features two identical images of President Joko Widodo conversing with a speech bubble above his head. In the first image, Jokowi asks, "SAYA MAU CUTI UNTUK KAMPANYE. BOLEH??" ("I want to take leave for campaigning. Am I allowed to do so?"). Then the second picture replied, "BOLEH, SILAKEN. SELAMA BAPAK CUTI, TUGAS NEGARA SAYA YANG GANTIKEN. SANTAI SAJA" (Sure, feel free to take your leave. I'll handle the state duties while you're away. Just relax). The headline reads "PUNCAK KOMEDI 2024" (Peak Comedy 2024), and there is a small text at the bottom indicating the news source: "KPU Chairman: Jokowi is entitled to campaign, but he must ask permission from

President Jokowi "(" KPU Chairman: Jokowi is entitled to campaign, but he must ask permission from President Jokowi").

Figure 7. Example of semiotics representation: (de)legitimization mythopoesis

The red color carries significant political and social connotations, particularly in the context of socialism and communism, symbolizing revolution, power, and the working class (Allan, 2009; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). It is also associated with leftist movements and can evoke strong feelings of solidarity or opposition depending on one's political stance. In memes, the red color can be used to highlight intense emotions or key points (Caivano, 1998; Eco, 1986; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). According to semiotic theories and perspectives, Saussure's (cited in Berger, 2014) theory of signs argues that a sign consists of a "signifier" (the form of the sign) and a "signified" (the concept it represents). In this context, the red color (signifier) can signify various concepts such as love, danger, or revolution (signified). Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model cited in (Hoopes, 2014), which includes the representamen (the form), the interpretant (the sense made by the sign), and the object (what the sign refers to), states that for the red color, the interpretant could be a feeling or a concept evoked by the observer, varying greatly depending on the context and cultural background. Mythology Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1968)argues that colors such as red carry a "myth" or cultural meaning that goes beyond their direct use. For example, the red color in media and advertising often conjures up myths of vibrancy and excitement to sell products, tapping into deeper cultural narratives. Van Leeuwen's (2005) emphasize social semiotics provides a framework for analyzing how these signs and their meanings are constructed and interpreted within a specific socio-cultural context. In the case of the meme in Figure 7, the use of identical images of Jokowi and the speech bubble can be seen as a form of multimodal communication, where visual and textual elements work together to create meaning. This aligns with Van Leeuwen's approach, which considers how different semiotic resources (such as images, text, and color) combine to convey complex messages. The study of semiotics helps in understanding how meaning is constructed and interpreted (Mingers, 2017; Siregar, 2022). The figure 7 meme was analyzed including the identification of signs (visual elements, text) and their connotations (Sebeok, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2001). The two identical images of Jokowi in Figure 7, the speech bubble, and the text function as signifiers. They represent a literal image of Jokowi requesting campaign leave and responding himself. Furthermore, they signify the absurdity and irony of Jokowi having to ask permission from himself to campaign while simultaneously performing state duties. These connotations humorously and satirically highlight the bureaucratic procedures and potential conflicts of interest when the same person holds multiple important roles.

The mythopoeia shown in meme figure 6 relates to the perception of presidential omnipotence, suggesting that Jokowi is so important in government that he ends up talking to himself about official business. This underscores the comedic absurdity of a president who needs to legitimize his actions through himself. Mythopoeia involves using stories or narratives to convey a deeper meaning or to critique social practices (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997). In this case, the cartoon image uses elements of humor and irony to illustrate the absurdity of bureaucracy, where President Jokowi has to ask permission from himself to campaign. The meme in Figure 7 narrates a situation where procedural rules are so rigid that they lead to a humorous self-authorization

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scenario. Moreover, criticizing bureaucracy implicitly criticizes inefficiency and redundancy in bureaucratic processes. The humorous depiction falls into the category of mythopoesis because it uses narrative (a conversation between two Jokowi's) to highlight and criticize the bureaucratic system's impracticality.

Although mythopoesis is a (de)legitimization strategy applicable in Figure 7, authorization is also relevant. The meme directly refers to the institutional rules that require President Jokowi to ask permission from himself: "In terms of institutional authority, the KPU (General Election Commission) Regulation requires Jokowi to authorize himself to take campaign leave." Meanwhile, the satirical take on the authority of the satire highlights the absurdity of the rule, thus delegitimizing the authority of the bureaucratic requirement.

CONCLUSION

The semiotic representation of digital communication through memefying political discourse on social media highlights the evolving nature of political engagement in the digital age. As cultural artifacts, memes encapsulate the complexities and nuances of the contemporary political landscape, offering a unique lens to understand the interplay between media, culture, and politics. While they democratize political communication and enable the rapid spread of ideas, they also require a critical approach to understand their impact on public discourse and their potential challenges.

Through this study, we explore the complex interplay between semiotic representations and processes of (de)legitimization in the digital communication of political discourse as embodied in social media memes. Through a semiotic perspective, we decipher various signs, including images, texts, colors, and their interrelationships, to reveal underlying messages that challenge or uphold societal norms and power structures. The creators of memes have unwittingly employed

strategies such as intertextuality, humor, irony, and rationalization. Ultimately, these memes serve as a powerful tool to delegitimize a political figure and ideology. Moreover, with today's status of social media as an easily accessible and pervasive medium allows for the rapid dissemination of any kind of information, including memes, which significantly amplifies their impact on political discourse.

The application of social semiotics, as (Van Leeuwen, 2005, 2007) outlined, provides a robust framework to analyze the multimodal elements of memes and their socio-cultural implications. Through this study, we seek to show that semiotic resources, such as colors, gestures, and textual elements, can be used strategically to convey complex political messages as Van Leeuwen (2005) views social semiotics as "a form of inquiry" that "comes into its own when applied to particular events and particular problems" and, therefore "is not a 'pure' theory, not a field in itself" (Van Leeuwen, 2005) but is "applicable" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) and multidisciplinary. For example, the color red in political memes often evokes connotations of power, revolution, or danger. At the same time, gestures such as the "metal" hand pose can imply rebellion or irony. In their analysis of images, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) explain that modality relies on the complex interplay of various cues such as color saturation, color differentiation, brightness, and detail. These factors collectively guide audiences or viewers to interpret visual representations as more naturalistic, abstract, sensory, or technical.

These semiotic choices are not arbitrary, but deeply embedded in the cultural codes and narratives accepted by diverse audiences, thus increasing the impact and reach of memes. The ability of social media to spread information quickly and widely underscores the importance of understanding semiotic representations in contemporary political communication. In addition, Van Leeuwen's (2007) strategies of (de)legitimization,

specifically rationalization and moral evaluation, are crucial in understanding how memes criticize or support political actors and actions. Rationalization (de)legitimization involves providing logical explanations to justify or undermine behavior, as seen in memes highlighting inconsistencies or absurdities in political rhetoric and practices. Meanwhile, (de)legitimization of moral evaluation assesses actions based on ethical standards, as illustrated in memes that question the integrity or ethics of political figures. By combining these strategies and semiotic analysis, this research highlights how memes function as cultural artifacts that reflect and shape political discourse in the digital age. The pervasive nature of social media allows these memes to reach a broad audience quickly, thus amplifying their role in influencing public opinion and political legitimacy. This underscores the importance of social media as a battleground for political communication and the role of memes in shaping contemporary political narratives.

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