

Representation of Teachers' Lives through Memes in Indonesia and United States: A Multimodal Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design and adopts a social semiotics approach to investigate how memes portray the lives of teachers in Indonesia and the United States. Memes, as a form of digital narrative, offer unique insights into culturally specific experiences and societal perceptions of educators. This study analyzed a selection of widely circulated memes to understand how semiotic resources - such as imagery, text, and symbols are mobilized to construct meanings about teachers' roles and challenges. Through this lens, memes are not only seen as entertainment but also as sites of social commentary that influence public discourse on education. By focusing on humor and social critique, memes revealed deeper societal attitude toward the teaching profession, including issues related to teacher identity, economic challenges, and the status of educators in different cultural contexts. By using descriptive qualitative method, it was found that in Indonesia, for instance, memes frequently highlight the struggles faced by *guru honor* (honorary teachers), drawing attention to the impact of financial instability on perceptions of educational quality. In addition, the challenges that teachers have to face in Indonesia was clearly depicted through the images of criminalization in educational sector. Meanwhile, in U.S memes depicted teachers as a profession with a heavy workload. To represent this meaning, the memes in U.S mostly used animals as their modes such as cats and squirrels to represent their fast-paced job. The findings suggest that memes play a significant role in shaping and reflecting public perceptions, contributing to broader conversations about the value of education and the evolving identity of teachers in a digital era.

Key Words

Memes, Multimodality, Social Semiotics, Teachers

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif dan pendekatan semiosis sosial untuk mengkaji bagaimana meme merepresentasikan kehidupan para guru di Indonesia dan Amerika Serikat. Meme, sebagai bentuk narasi digital, menawarkan wawasan unik tentang pengalaman budaya yang spesifik dan persepsi masyarakat terhadap profesi pendidik. Studi ini menganalisis sejumlah meme yang beredar luas untuk memahami bagaimana sumber daya semiotik seperti gambar, teks, dan *symbol* dimanfaatkan dalam membangun makna tentang peran dan tantangan yang dihadapi oleh para guru.

Melalui pendekatan ini, meme tidak hanya dilihat sebagai hiburan semata, tetapi juga sebagai ruang kritik sosial yang berkontribusi dalam wacana publik mengenai pendidikan. Dengan berfokus pada humor dan kritik sosial, meme mengungkap sikap masyarakat yang lebih dalam terhadap profesi guru, termasuk persoalan identitas guru, tantangan ekonomi, serta status sosial pendidik dalam konteks budaya yang berbeda.

Melalui metode kualitatif deskriptif, ditemukan bahwa di Indonesia, misalnya, meme kerap menyoroti perjuangan para *guru honor*, terutama dalam kaitannya dengan ketidakstabilan finansial yang memengaruhi persepsi publik terhadap kualitas pendidikan. Selain itu, tantangan guru di Indonesia juga direpresentasikan melalui citra kriminalisasi dalam sektor pendidikan, yang memperlihatkan kerentanan posisi guru dalam sistem hukum dan sosial.

Sementara itu, meme-meme di Amerika Serikat menggambarkan profesi guru sebagai pekerjaan dengan beban kerja yang tinggi. Untuk menyampaikan pesan ini, meme di AS banyak menggunakan hewan—seperti kucing dan tupai sebagai medium representasi pekerjaan yang serba cepat dan penuh tekanan.

Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa meme memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk sekaligus merefleksikan persepsi publik, serta turut menyumbang dalam percakapan yang lebih luas tentang nilai pendidikan dan identitas guru yang terus berkembang di era digital.

Kata Kunci

Meme, Multimodalitas, Semiosis Sosial, Guru

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I. INTRODUCTION

Information is everywhere and some of them may be a product of humans' reflective thinking about certain phenomena. This is also seen in a vast rising features on social medias in which people are easy to share their thoughts and insights. In most kinds of social media, thoughts and insights are shared in a form of typed texts, pictures and even sound. In linguistics, these elements are called as mode. The combination of these modes is labelled as multimodality. Simply, multimodality is defined as a meaning creation as the result of the interaction among the modes such as image, writing, color and layout. (Jewitt, 2009) The word "interaction" means any action that a creator makes in order to communicate a message. These utilized resources in multimodality are influenced by the motivations and interests of certain community in a particular social context (Norris and Maier, 2014). Thus, it can be understood that a multimodal poster may be intended to reveal some social issues or arguments of certain communities or creators.

According to Norries and Maier (2014:127) multimodality can be studied through various lenses such as : Conversation Analysis (CA), anthropology, and social semiotics. In this research, social semiotic is used as an approach to study multimodality. Social semiotic approach was the extension from the concept of social meanings (i.e. ideational, interpersonal, and textual) proposed by Halliday. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) exhibited that meaning functions can be realized visually through semiotic resources to communicate ideologies and discourses. For this approach, sign-making is the genesis of meaning. Thus, the questions arose in social-semiotic approach are: *Whose interest and agency is at work here in the making of meaning?*; *What meaning is being made here?*; *With what resources, in what social environment?*. Thus, social semiotic approach views various modes as an integrated whole, called a sign. Sign which consists of several semiotic inventories potentially give various meaning which depends on what is within it, such as its color, expression, text, and the organization or layout. (Leeuwen, 2005). In addition to this, Kress and Leewuen (2006) also mentioned that visual communication is used to maintain communication between the creators and viewers. For this, Kress mentioned that there are two participants: (1) represented participants (people, place, and things depicted in images); and (2) interactive participants (people who communicate through images, the producers and viewers of images).

Since various signs obviously exist in social media, static pictures like memes are diffused as one of the main media of idea expression. The ideas are not merely just concepts or buzzwords but also a cultural logic lived in a society. The underlying reason of why it is said as a reflection of a cultural logic is due to the three features of memes which are relevant to the analysis of digital culture, they are: (1) a continous propagation from one person to society; (2) resharing content/memes through mimicry and remix; and (3) spreading through competition and selection (Shifman, 2014). For this reason, internet memes can be understood as norms and values construction through cultural digital artifacts like photoshopped images and so on. One study had been currently conducted on memes and multimodality. Maharani (2022) conducted a study about the stereotype of women in this modern era which was represented in the memes of Disney Princess. Her finding revealed that the features attached to women nowadays have changed from being seen as a weak creature to somebody that can protect themselves. Besides, in terms of verbal languages, nowadays women have been seen as more assertive. In addition to this study, Ugoala (2022) studied memes in social media, namely Twitter. She revealed that emojis, gestures, and other semiotic resources in the memes complemented each other to express resentfulness of the resident doctors to the neglected healthcare sector by the minister of health in Nigeria. Thus, from these previous studies, it was understood that memes viewed in multimodal analysis utilize visuals which provides either the non-verbal aspect of the context and the background information of an issue to interpret the meme accurately. Both of these studies represented one specific social issue, perhaps in their country. Meanwhile, issues in any social aspect such as: beauty, industries, and professions, etc would always exist. Another study on multimodality that depicted beauty as social issue. Wong (2019) studied multimodal communication in magazine advertisements in Hongkong. He revealed that the choreography of image and texts in the advertisements caused the normalization of the intervention of physical appearance of female body image since the society value thinness and ample breasts.

In line with this, Jewitt (2016) also emphasized that meaning is made of all semiotic resources or modes being used and give a complete whole. The modes themselves are a set of socially and culturally shaped resources for creating meaning. Thus, the study of multimodality in different social environments potentially reveal different meanings although the object of the study is the same. Along with its aims of enriching the horizon of knowledge in the resarch of multimodality, some questions have been arose in this study: (1) what meanings were reflected in memes to represent teachers' lives in Indonesia and US? (2) how are the meanings of teachers' lives represented through memes?

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials, in this study, refer to theories which enable the researcher to answer the two research problems. While method refers to the research method including research design, data and data collection, data analysis and conclusion drawing. Each of the two parts are discussed below.

Theoretical Materials

The theoretical materials refer to the theory of multimodality from the perspectives of social-semiotic approach in its data analysis. Social-semiotic theory in multimodality focuses on meaning creation in all forms. The meanings were derived from the social environment and in social interactions, while semiotics is the sign. It is known that signs exist in all modes. Thus, all modes need considering its contribution to the meaning of a sign-complex. Social-semiotic theory deals with the general

principles of representation: modes, means, and arrangements. (Kress, 2010). The interpretation of data in terms of the meaning of colors as its modes was assisted by the theory of colors by Adams and Stone (2017).

In this study, the research problems are formulated into: (1) what meanings were reflected in memes to represent teachers' lives in Indonesia and US? (2) how are the meanings of teachers' lives represented through memes? As to the theory of social semiotic mentioned previously that multimodality refers to the representation principle of modes, means, and arrangements, the first research question refers to the modes. The modes can be in the form of writing, image, number, colour, and facial expression. Meanwhile, the term *means* refer to the media that is used to express modes, such as: digital screen, voice, paper, etc. In this study, the means itself was digital poster found in social media. In the second research question, it was aimed at revealing how the modes were arranged, mostly between text and pictures. The position of pictures and text whether it is positioned as left and right will reveal which element act as the point of departure or anchor for the message.

Method

This research was conducted by using descriptive qualitative design. The data was taken from social media such as Thread and Instagram, and a blog. The data was in the form of pictures specifically memes that represented teachers' lives in Indonesia and United States. There were 40 memes in total; each country had 20 memes.

The data were analyzed by using Miles and Huberman (2014) which consisted of data condensation, data display and conclusion drawing. First, data condensation in this study referred to selecting the memes that only represented teachers' lives in Indonesia and in U.S since there were many memes about education and closely related to the daily basis of schools and teachers. Second, data display pertains to the analysis and interpret the data so it can be displayed in the form of table. The table in this study contained a compact information about the meaning of memes both from Indonesia and U.S; it told the readers about the different meaning of memes in both countries. Third, conclusion drawing involves the explanation of why certain country used certain modes in memes.

III. FINDINGS

Meanings Revealed through Memes About Teachers' Lives in Indonesia and United States

Based on the data analysis, it was found that there were some differences of memes about teachers' lives in Indonesia and in United States though they both reflected problem or issues. In Indonesia, the problem reflected in the memes were mostly about financial problem and constraint on control. Meanwhile, in United States, the memes mostly represented an issue about overtime workload.

1. Financial Problem (FP) on Teachers' Lives Represented in Indonesia's Memes

Financial problem in this case refers to teachers' salary. In Indonesia, there were some terms for teachers such as: honorary teachers, government employee teachers, and private teachers. Although it has many terms, this profession faced similar problems. However, the most highlighted issue was to honorary teachers, as seen in data 1 below.

Data 1



In data 1, there were some modes used such as text and pictures. There was a small text above the four men. A teacher and some students were reading books. In addition, there was a lot of money scattered in this picture. The four men in this picture referred to government official who peculate funds for education. At the end, it affected the atmosphere of education especially the inner battle of teachers' feelings specifically their salary as it can be seen from the teachers' mimic on the photo.

2. Constraint on Control (CC) on Teachers' Lives Represented in Indonesia's Memes

Constraint on Control was a common issue that teachers faced in Indonesia. There were some cases emerged in which teachers were criminalized when they carried out their duties. Due to this phenomenon, there were some memes appeared in social media as seen in data 2 below.

Data 2



Based on data 2, it was found that a small text *guru* and pictures were used to express a meaning. In the center of the picture, there was an old man holding a book. In his name badge on his T-shirt, it was written *guru*. The old man was in jail, and his expression clearly showed that he was sad. Behind the old man / teacher, some people pointed their finger to the teacher, and even a student mocked at him. This picture vividly showed that the teacher was accused of something in which he might not do at all. Besides, he also lost all respectful feeling he might have had got. It made him really sad. There was also a red and white flag behind all people which clearly showed that it was an event in Indonesia. Then, the response to this phenomenon often led to these following pictures as seen in data 3 and data 4.

Data 3



In data 3, there were two clowns, some students and a flag of Indonesia. In addition to these people, there was also a text *kadang guru jadi badut di depan siswa*. The text clarified the meaning of the picture; sometimes teachers in Indonesia were better acted as clowns instead of admonishing students which could probably lead to criminalization of the teachers themselves. Some teachers chose to be clowns in the classroom, but some teachers chose to be indifferent as seen in data 4 below.

Data 4



The picture in data 4 was another response to the issue on the constraint of control that teachers had to face in Indonesia. In this picture, there was a teacher doing a meditation, meanwhile some students at the back are laughing and some are fighting. This picture revealed that some teachers in Indonesia chose to be indifferent by taking their silent time in order to calm their mind instead of being trapped in a criminalization as in the previous one, data 3. This interpretation was assisted by the presence of a text *saat guru tidak peduli*. In English, it is translated as *when teachers are indifferent*.

3. Overtime Workload (OW) on Teachers' Lives Represented in US's Memes

Overtime workload were the common issue that teachers faced in United States. It was reflected from the occurrence of memes presented about the unending tasks that teachers needed to finish as it can be seen in data 5 below.

Data 5



Based on data 5, there were two modes presented such as the text *become a teacher they said; it will be fun they said*", the picture in which there were a teacher and a bunch of paper at the back. This combination revealed that many people or society in US mostly think that being a teacher is fun. However, the expression of the man in the picture and a bunch of paper mounted at the back of the man contributed to the opposite of societies' thought.

Data 6



Based on data 6, two modes were used. The first was a picture of a wet polar bear, and the second is the white text on it. The polar bear was quite big and they could not move swiftly, and due to its wet fur, the burden on its body was even heavier. Thus, the polar bear was proning by the ice lake. Through the existence of the phrase *teachers after the first full week of school*, the picture revealed more meaning, that was being a teacher was an exhausting job especially in their first week of school day. It denoted that teachers in US had a big workload.

The portion of meanings reflected on memes used in Indonesia and US to represent teachers' lives can be seen in this following table.

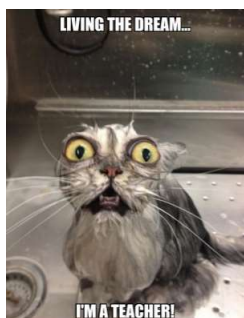
Table 1. Meanings reflected on Memes used in Indonesia and US to represent teachers' lives

No	In Indonesia	F	%	In US	F	%
1.	Financial Problem	15	37.5	Overtime workload	20	50
2.	Constraint on Control	5	12.5			
Total		20	50		20	50

Representation of Meanings through Color and Picture

There were some differences of representing meanings of memes to represent teachers' lives either in U.S or in Indonesia. In terms of color, in U.S and Indonesia, the colors tended to be neutral. However, the pictures used in the meme were mostly animals for the U.S, and mostly human in Indonesia. The differences about this can be seen in this following data.

Data 7



In data 7, the meme was dominated by gray. Gray was categorized as neutral color and it could reveal positive and negative meaning. In this data, the color was translated as a negative meaning such as: indecision, overwhelmed and sadness. The most relevant meaning for this color is overwhelmed since the expression shown was a goggled cat. The color and the picture in this meme revealed that teachers in US had better forget their dream since they were easily overwhelmed of many things to do at school. This data was also supported by other memes that validated this interpretation, as it can be seen in data 8 below.

Data 8



In data 8, the meme was dominated by neutral color such as brown and white. These colors could be interpreted into both positive and negative sides. Since the expression of the cat was a frown face, then the color which integrated with pictures might be interpreted negatively. In this data, the meme ought to represent the fact that being a teacher in U.S would cause them to face emotional fragility as it was in line with the meaning of the dominant color in it. Emotional fragility might be felt especially when teachers were involved in a faculty meeting in which teachers had to experience overwhelmed and low tolerance for difficult emotions during the discussion. Thus, it might be the reason why it was said there "it was awful" on the meme.

Data 9



In data 9, the pictures were dominated by blue as its color. Blue itself can mean positive and negative meaning. However, blue in this meme meant something negative as a feeling of detachment. The feeling of detachment itself was supported by some pictures in the meme such as a girl who learned to swim joyfully and a trainer but it was labelled as teachers office (*ruang guru*) and government (*pemerintah*). It intended to say that teachers mostly welcomed every new policy to the government related to education. However, the practice of the policy itself was burdensome to teachers as it was seen to the other picture labelled as teachers (*guru benar*). In addition to this negative content, another one was also presented in the picture of a skeleton and it was labelled as honorary teachers (*guru honor*). The skeleton referred to the honorary teachers who had died waiting for the real implementation that benefits their status.

Table 2. Representation of Meanings through Color and Picture

No.	Mode	Indonesia	Meaning	f	%	U.S	Meaning	f	%
1.	Color	brown	overwhelmed	3	15	brown	overwhelmed	14	70
		blue	emotional	17	85	white	fragility	2	10
			detachment			gray	sadness	4	20
						cat	Represented	17	85
2.	Picture	person	represented	18	90	squirrel	participants	1	5
		skeleton	participants	2	10				
						person		2	10

Based on table 2, it can be concluded that there was a difference between memes of teachers lives in Indonesia and in U.S. In Indonesia, the memes were dominated by using the pictures of person and dominated by blue for its color. It revealed that the phenomena of teachers' lives in Indonesia were exposed in direct way instead of in indirect way. The direct way here also meant that the social critique about this profession needed to be a major concern for the government in terms of applying good policy for Indonesia especially in educational sector.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, teachers' lives as depicted on memes in Indonesia and the United States reflected culturally specific experiences of educators. In Indonesia, the most problematic case in teachers' lives was about the financial welfare, especially honorary teachers (*guru honor*). In addition to this, the issue about teachers' lives in Indonesia was also about the authority of teachers to educate their students in which it often led to criminalization of their profession. All of these phenomena were obviously depicted in the form of pictures of human or person as its represented participants. This might be intended to show the viewers a more vivid current situation of educational system in Indonesia; it might be a critique or a pathetic expression of the creator. Meanwhile, teachers' lives in U.S was represented through the images of animals such as cats and squirrels which are quick reflexes animals. These animals were chosen since they depicted their ability to handle the heavy workload they should handle. By finding the contrast phenomena of teachers' lives between these countries, it was understandable that memes would also give out different modes and represented different meaning depending on the social issue as well as the culture of the country.

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