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Memes as Ideological Texts: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Political Semiotics in Digital Cultures

Rika Suryaningsih

Media and Cultural Studies, Department of Communication, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia.

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Abstract - This paper explores internet memes as ideological texts through the lens of multimodal discourse analysis, emphasizing their role in shaping and reflecting political beliefs within digital cultures. Memes function as potent semiotic tools that condense complex political ideas into shareable, humorous, and often subversive content. The study investigates how visual and textual elements of memes combine to construct political meanings, reinforce ideologies, and mobilize online publics. Drawing on semiotic theory, critical discourse analysis, and digital ethnography, the paper examines case studies of politically charged memes from diverse sociopolitical contexts. It reveals how memes serve as both participatory media and mechanisms of ideological reproduction, highlighting their dual capacity to resist and reinforce hegemonic narratives. Ultimately, the paper argues that memes are more than trivial entertainment; they are dynamic ideological artifacts that actively contribute to political discourse in the digital age.

Keywords - Memes, Ideology, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Political Communication, Semiotics, Digital Culture, Critical Discourse Analysis, Participatory Media, Visual Rhetoric, Online Political Expression.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, internet memes have evolved from simple humorous images into powerful instruments of communication, particularly within the context of digital political discourse. In contemporary digital cultures, memes function not merely as entertainment but as participatory artifacts through which users engage in social commentary, ideological alignment, and identity formation. Their virality, brevity, and visual appeal make them ideal carriers of political messages, often encoding complex ideological positions into accessible, replicable, and emotionally resonant formats. The purpose of this study is to examine how memes operate as ideological texts by dissecting their semiotic structures and multimodal affordances. This research focuses on understanding how political memes contribute to the construction, reinforcement, or contestation of political ideologies in online spaces. Through the lens of multimodal discourse analysis, the study seeks to uncover the interplay of visual, textual, and symbolic elements in shaping political meaning.

Table 1: Meme Platforms and Political Events Covered

| Platform | Political Context Covered | Example Use Cases |
|-----------|------------------------------------|---|
| Twitter | U.S. 2020 Elections, Brexit | Real-time meme warfare and hashtags |
| Instagram | George Floyd Protests, Roe v. Wade | Infographics, viral slogans |
| Reddit | Indian Farmer Protests, COVID-19 | Meme threads and community mockery dynamics |

The scope of this research spans memes shared on popular platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit, focusing on politically themed content that emerged in relation to specific electoral events, protest movements, and cultural flashpoints. Rather than analyzing memes in isolation, the study considers their contextual production, circulation, and reception within digital communities. The primary research questions guiding this inquiry are: (1) How do memes function as multimodal texts that encode political ideologies? (2) What visual and textual strategies



are employed in memes to construct or critique political meanings? (3) How do users engage with memes as ideological agents in digital spaces?

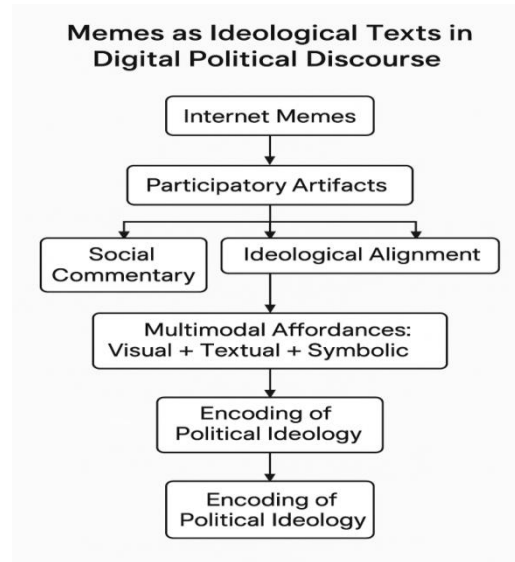


Fig. 1 Memes as ideological texts in digital political discourse

By interrogating these questions, the study highlights the significance of analyzing memes as ideological texts in the context of political communication. Given the increasing influence of social media on public opinion, policy discourse, and electoral outcomes, understanding the ideological work performed by memes is both timely and essential. This analysis contributes to media and cultural studies by framing memes not as trivial digital artifacts but as dynamic semiotic forms that mediate political thought, sentiment, and collective identity in the digital age.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this paper draws from classical and contemporary theories in semiotics, discourse analysis, and digital communication. Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making, provides a critical lens to understand how memes construct political messages through the interplay of signs, symbols, and cultural codes. Drawing from Roland Barthes' concept of mythologies, the analysis considers how memes naturalize ideological messages by presenting them as common sense. Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model sign, object, and interpretant further informs how memes function as signs that link symbolic imagery with political referents, often invoking broader sociopolitical narratives.

The relationship between ideology and discourse is further examined through the theoretical contributions of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Norman Fairclough. Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatuses and interpellation is relevant for understanding how memes "hail" individuals into ideological positions, subtly shaping subjectivities. Foucault's emphasis on power/knowledge dynamics and the discursive formation of truth regimes helps contextualize how memes participate in the production and contestation of political realities. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers methodological tools to examine how linguistic and discursive strategies embedded in memes reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies, particularly within media ecologies where power is distributed through symbolic representation.

Central to the study is the use of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), as articulated by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. MDA extends traditional linguistic analysis to consider how multiple modes images, words, colors, layout, and font combine to create meaning. This framework is especially pertinent to memes, which rely on

the synchrony of visual and verbal elements. MDA allows for a nuanced reading of how memes construct meaning through composition, salience, and intertextuality, thus offering insights into their ideological functions.

Lastly, the framework incorporates scholarship on digital political communication, exploring how platforms and affordances shape the circulation, reception, and impact of political memes. In digital cultures, where information is rapidly disseminated and constantly recontextualized, memes operate not in isolation but within broader communicative ecologies. Understanding their political semiotics thus requires an appreciation of both form and context, integrating insights from media studies, political science, and cultural theory.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design rooted in multimodal discourse analysis and digital ethnography. Given the complex and layered nature of memes, which are inherently multimodal and intertextual, a qualitative approach is most appropriate for uncovering the nuanced ways in which they encode political ideology. The methodology is designed to trace both the construction of memes as semiotic texts and their circulation within particular digital subcultures.

Table 2: Meme Selection Criteria

| Criteria | Explanation |
|----------------------|---|
| Thematic Relevance | Focused on political topics: elections, protests, social debates |
| Platform Source | Reddit, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook |
| Modality | Contains both visual and textual components |
| Engagement Threshold | High levels of likes, shares, reposts |
| Temporal Relevance | Tied to specific political events (e.g., BLM, Brexit, Indian elections, U.S. elections) |

Selection criteria for memes involve purposive sampling based on thematic relevance, political context, and virality. Memes are chosen from platforms such as Reddit, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, with emphasis on content related to electoral events, protests, and socio-political debates (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Brexit, U.S. elections, Indian general elections). Memes selected must include both visual and textual elements and must have engaged a significant digital audience through likes, shares, or reposts. These parameters ensure that the study examines memes that are both politically salient and culturally influential.

Data collection draws on methods from digital ethnography, wherein the researcher engages with meme communities as both observer and participant, collecting artifacts, metadata (e.g., timestamps, hashtags), and user interactions. Screenshots, annotations, and archival tools are used to preserve meme content in its native platform context. The researcher also takes note of comment threads, repost patterns, and meme remixes, allowing for a broader understanding of user engagement and meaning negotiation.

The analytical tools used include semiotic analysis and multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). Semiotic analysis involves identifying the denotative and connotative meanings of visual and textual signs in memes, uncovering ideological messages and symbolic associations. MDA provides a systematic framework to examine how various modes text, image, color, layout, gesture work together to produce meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design informs this process, focusing on elements such as salience, framing, modality, and intertextuality. Together, these tools allow for a layered interpretation of how memes operate as ideological texts and how they interact with their social and political environments.

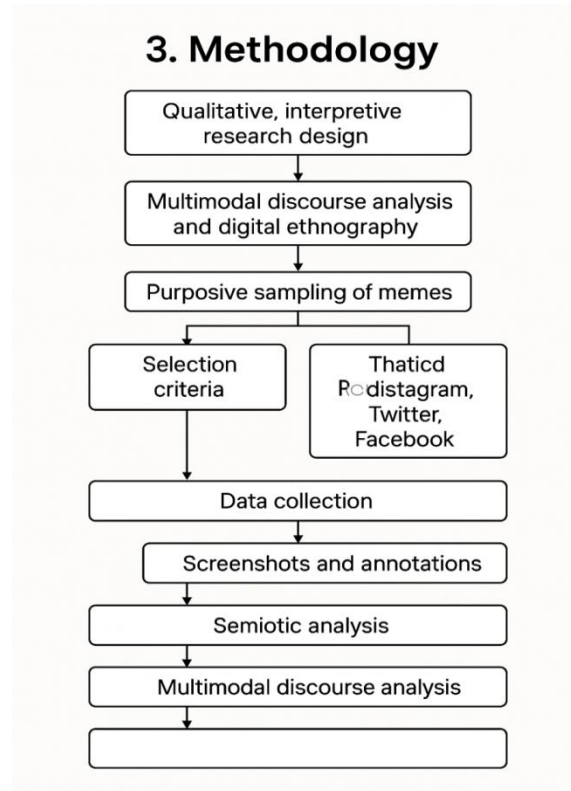


Fig. 2 Methodology

4. Case Studies and Analysis

This section presents a series of case studies that exemplify how internet memes serve as ideological battlegrounds in digital culture. The first case examines right-wing political memes that use nationalist rhetoric to evoke pride, fear, or resentment. These memes often feature national flags, militaristic symbols, and hyper-masculine imagery accompanied by textual slogans like “Make X Great Again” or “Real Patriots Don’t Kneel.” The semiotics of these memes appeal to populist sentiments, constructing a binary between “real citizens” and “traitorous others.” Through color choices (red, white, blue) and aggressive typography, they evoke urgency and authority, reinforcing a discourse of traditionalism and exclusion.

The second case focuses on progressive memes that engage in narratives of resistance, inclusion, and social justice. These memes often appear in the context of movements like Black Lives Matter, feminist protests, or climate activism. Visually, they utilize protest photography, pastel color palettes, and inclusive language, aiming to emotionally resonate with marginalized identities. The textual overlays are often quotes from activists or satirical reinterpretations of institutional language, positioning the meme as a counter-hegemonic voice. These memes not only critique dominant systems but also foster a sense of collective empowerment and solidarity among viewers.

The third case delves into satirical memes, which occupy a unique ideological position characterized by ambiguity and reflexivity. These memes rely heavily on irony, intertextuality, and absurd humor, often referencing popular culture or remixing political events with unexpected juxtapositions. They may appear ideologically incoherent at first glance, but through layered semiotic codes, they critique both ends of the political spectrum. Their strategic ambiguity allows them to travel across political boundaries, fostering both subversion and misinterpretation depending on audience reception.

Across all three cases, a close multimodal analysis of visual and textual components reveals how different semiotic elements such as imagery, font style, composition, and symbolism construct ideological meanings.

Typography can signal authority or rebellion, while images whether heroic or grotesque frame subjects as saviors or threats. Color schemes and design aesthetics signal emotional tone, from hopeful to threatening. Furthermore, these memes are steeped in intertextuality, referencing previous cultural moments, viral content, or political tropes. Irony and mimicry are central to their discursive power, allowing users to encode critique while maintaining plausible deniability. The analysis illustrates how memes operate within a complex web of semiotic cues, digital norms, and cultural references, crafting ideological narratives that resonate deeply in fragmented digital publics.

5. Memes as Ideological Tools

Memes function as potent ideological instruments, capable of both reinforcing and challenging dominant power structures. As condensed and easily shareable cultural artifacts, they encode specific worldviews, beliefs, and value systems into everyday discourse. In authoritarian contexts, state-sponsored or partisan memes are used to bolster nationalistic sentiment, delegitimize opposition, and normalize exclusionary narratives. Conversely, grassroots activists deploy memes as tools of resistance, using humor and visual rhetoric to critique neoliberalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and systemic inequality. The ideological function of memes lies not only in what they explicitly state but in what they implicitly normalize or ridicule, shaping public consciousness in subtle but profound ways.

A critical feature of meme-based political discourse is the use of humor, satire, and irony as framing devices. Humor allows ideological messages to bypass resistance, disarm criticism, and increase virality. Satirical memes exaggerate or parody political situations, exposing contradictions and hypocrisies. Irony, particularly when layered with intertextuality, serves as a shield for controversial or radical positions, allowing creators to disclaim responsibility while still advancing their message. These rhetorical strategies are central to the meme's persuasive power they create emotional resonance while cloaking serious critique in seemingly light-hearted or absurd forms.

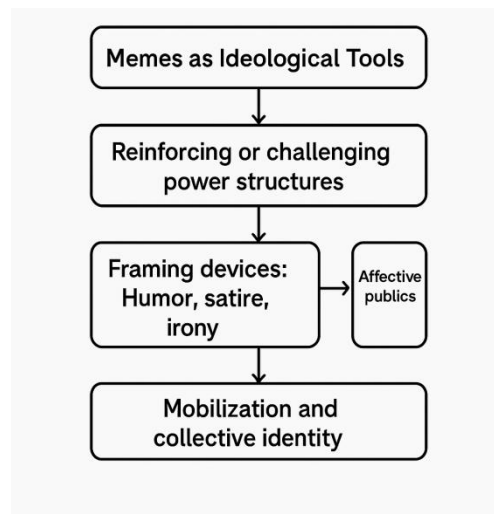


Fig. 3 Memes as ideological tools

Furthermore, memes contribute to the formation of affective publics, or digital communities united by shared emotions, experiences, and political stances. These publics are not bound by geography but by affective investment in particular issues or identities. Memes circulate within these groups as cultural glue, reinforcing collective identity and offering emotional catharsis. They help articulate grievances, hopes, and ideological alignment, often becoming symbolic tokens of membership. In this way, memes act not just as media objects, but as social instruments of mobilization, transforming passive spectators into active participants in political discourse and action.

Table 3: Comparison – State vs. Grassroots Memes

| Aspect | State-Sponsored Memes | Grassroots Memes |
|-------------|---|---|
| Purpose | Promote dominant ideologies, control narratives | Resist hegemonic narratives, critique authority |
| Tone | Serious, patriotic, mocking opposition | Humorous, ironic, subversive |
| Examples | Nationalism, anti-opposition memes | Feminist, anti-capitalist, decolonial memes |
| Circulation | Often top-down, via coordinated campaigns | Bottom-up, viral via organic sharing |
| Function | Legitimizes state actions, discredits dissent | Builds solidarity, voices dissent |

6. Ethical and Sociopolitical Implications

Despite their potential for democratic expression, memes also raise serious ethical and sociopolitical concerns, particularly in relation to misinformation. Due to their rapid circulation and visual immediacy, memes often lack context, enabling the spread of distorted, misleading, or entirely false information. Political memes can misquote public figures, manipulate images, or misrepresent events to fit a particular ideological frame. Unlike traditional media, memes are rarely fact-checked, and their informal, humorous nature makes them especially effective at spreading disinformation while evading scrutiny. This has significant implications for public understanding, especially during election cycles or political crises.

Another major concern is the weaponization of memes in organized political campaigns. Far-right and extremist groups have strategically used meme culture to recruit followers, normalize hate speech, and frame conspiratorial thinking as edgy humor. These campaigns often exploit the aesthetics of online subcultures to camouflage radical ideology behind layers of irony and play. Memes are used to undermine trust in democratic institutions, attack journalists, and ridicule marginalized communities, thereby fostering a toxic political environment that thrives on polarization and cynicism. The seemingly innocuous format of memes makes them particularly dangerous tools in the digital arsenal of political manipulation.

Table 4: Ethical Risks of Political Memes

| Type of Risk | Description | Example |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Misinformation | Spread of false or misleading content due to lack of verification | Misquoted politicians, fake headlines, doctored images |
| Manipulation | Memos used to push propaganda or one-sided narratives | Selective framing of protests or conflicts |
| Defamation | Personal attacks on individuals or groups without accountability | Mocking marginalized communities or journalists |
| Normalization of Hate | Satirical format used to desensitize users to racist, sexist, or xenophobic ideas | Dog-whistle memes using Pepe or Wojak in white nationalist contexts |

Conversely, in authoritarian regimes or repressive political climates, memes can become tools of resistance, enabling subversive expression when direct critique is censored or punishable. Activists in countries like Iran, China, and Russia have used coded imagery, satire, and parody in meme form to circumvent surveillance and mobilize dissent. In these contexts, memes serve as vehicles for political agency and community-building under digital repression. However, such resistance is not without risk, as meme creators and sharers may face severe consequences, including arrest and censorship. These dual realities highlight the ambivalent nature of memes: they are at once agents of oppression and resistance, propaganda and parody, complicity and critique in the evolving landscape of digital political culture.

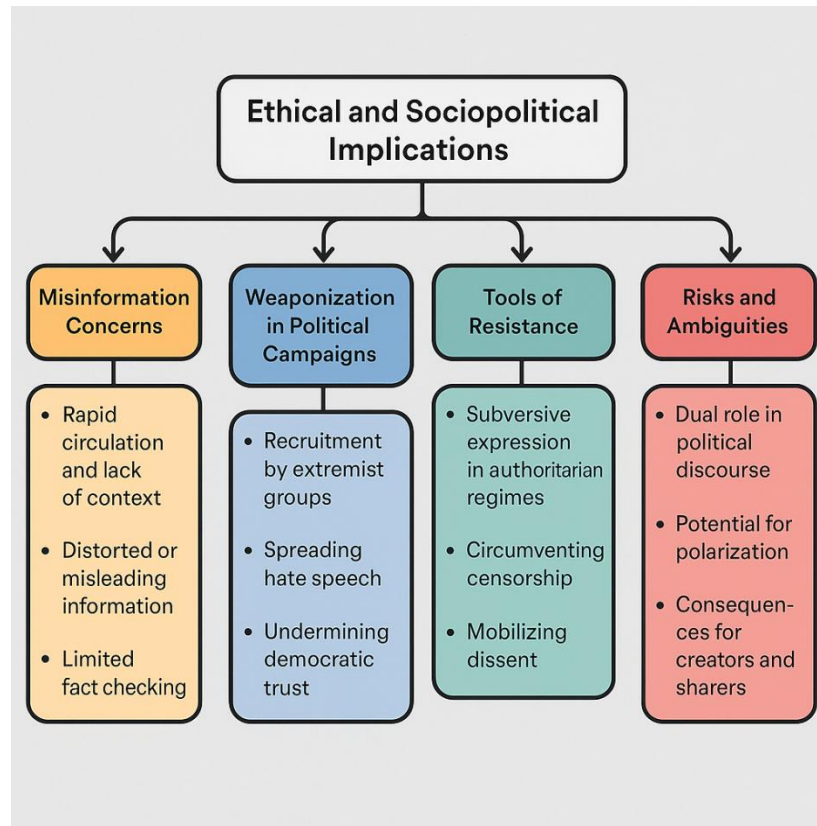


Fig. 4 Ethical and Sociopolitical Implications

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that internet memes are not merely forms of digital humor or transient cultural artifacts, but complex multimodal texts that encode, reproduce, and often challenge ideological frameworks within digital political discourse. Through an in-depth multimodal discourse analysis of political memes across various ideological spectrums right-wing nationalist rhetoric, progressive resistance narratives, and satirical ambiguity the paper has shown how memes employ a sophisticated interplay of signs, symbols, and stylistic choices to construct political meaning. The analysis revealed that the ideological power of memes lies in their capacity to blend the affective immediacy of visual media with the intertextual and ironic registers of internet culture, thereby enabling both subtle persuasion and overt critique. Furthermore, the research illustrates how memes participate in the formation of affective publics, contributing to the emotional and cultural dynamics that shape political engagement in digital environments.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the fields of media studies, critical discourse analysis, and digital semiotics by offering a nuanced framework for interpreting memes as ideological instruments. It challenges traditional understandings of political communication by foregrounding user-generated content as a central mechanism of discursive power in networked publics. Moreover, the integration of semiotic theory with digital ethnography expands methodological approaches to analyzing visual discourse, highlighting how participatory media reshapes the boundaries between producers and consumers of ideology. This research underscores the need to recognize memes not as peripheral to political life, but as vital communicative forms that reflect and mold collective consciousness in the digital age.

However, the study also acknowledges certain limitations. Due to the vast and ephemeral nature of meme culture, it was not feasible to provide an exhaustive analysis across all platforms or ideological contexts. The

selection of case studies, while diverse, was constrained by linguistic and regional focus, and may not fully capture the global dynamics of political memetics. Future research could explore comparative studies across cultures, longitudinal analyses of meme evolution, or incorporate computational methods such as sentiment analysis or network mapping to complement qualitative approaches. Additionally, the ethical implications of meme circulation, particularly regarding misinformation and psychological manipulation, remain critical areas for sustained scholarly inquiry. As digital cultures continue to evolve, interdisciplinary research into the ideological functions of memes will be essential to understanding the symbolic terrain of contemporary politics.

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