

## USING SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS TO ANALYZE THE PURPOSE OF CREATING COVID-19 MEME

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**Abstract:** The presence of social media makes the process of social interaction experience very significant changes. Communication through social media is a very important social interaction in human life. Along with the increasing use of social media, it has spawned new phenomena among social media users, one of which is creativity in making memes. Memes can be in the form of text or images that contain issues and events in a style that intrigues and are widely discussed because they spread and comment so quickly on social media. The purpose of this study is to describe the signifier and signified in the Covid-19 meme and explain the meaning contained in the Covid-19 meme. The Covid-19 meme itself is one of the memes found on social media. The approach used in this research is a qualitative approach which produces descriptive analysis. The researcher tries to describe the facts behind the creation of the Covid-19 meme circulating on social media. The signifiers found in the Covid-19 meme include snippets of famous movie and game scenes. The insinuations in the sentences are also very true to reality. The sentences provide a statement that contains information and there is an expression of the feelings of the creator as a fighter in the pandemic season.

**Keywords:** *covid-19; memes; semiotics.*

### INTRODUCTION

Today, in which people use the internet as the biggest social media and it has various functions. Social media is not only for entertainment which is lifestyle and music, but also as a medium to show daily life, express feelings, and also to criticize today's social phenomena. According to Junawan & Laugu (2020), social media is one of the fastest-growing media. Around 70% of internet users in the whole world are also active on social media. Social media such as *Facebook* dan *Twitter*, up until now still has a high level of users.

Recently, the development of information and communication technology has been growing rapidly. This certainly affects the lifestyle of humans in general. In the past, humans did not know the internet and now information can easily be obtained through the internet. In the past, humans only knew SMS as a means of sending short messages and now there are so many

platforms for sending short messages, for example, *Whatsapp*, *Line*, *Telegram*, *Wechat*, and so on. Even today the development of social media is increasingly unstoppable, such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *Pinterest*, *LinkedIn*, *Tumblr*, *TikTok*, and more.

Social media development today has become a necessity for human beings and can change a life. Many people are active on social media. They can spend hours surfing social media. This phenomenon is evidence that today people are very dependent on social media. The advantage of social media is the designs which are easy to use and have various features, such as can upload photos and videos, also send short messages via DM or *Direct Message* and *Inbox*.

In this era of globalization, it is not strange to do various activities using a computer, both for doing assignments and even socializing on social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *TikTok*, and others. This advancement shows that

communication and access to information are necessities that cannot be separated from people's lives. Social media is very commonly used by Indonesian people. Various kinds of social media in the form of applications can be downloaded easily on every smartphone, making it easier for users to interact on the social media they have, starting from chatting, updating status, updating photos or pictures, and so on. One of the activities on social media that is currently popular in society is spreading various *meme* images. According to Surya (2019), *meme* is one of the works of art that lately has been very lively raised by netizens on social media. In the digital era circulating *memes* are no longer understood as limited to small units of culture that are spread from person to person by copying or imitation, but now the term *meme* refers to the replication of a person's photo or image which is changed to another form, coupled with various written usually satire or joke via *Windows* (and other operating systems) from internet users. *Memes* can develop through imitation by humans according to the ideas stored in the brain and spread by the process of imitation and posting by *netizens*.

The presence of social media makes the process of community social interaction experience very significant changes. Communication through social media is a very important social interaction in human life. Through this communication, humans can exchange messages and information. Along with the increasing use of social media, it has spawned new phenomena among social media users, one of which is creativity in making memes (Owen & Zatori, 2021). *Memes* can be in the form of text or images that contain issues and events in a style that intrigues and becomes a hot topic of discussion because they spread and comment so quickly on social media (Woods & Hahner, 2019). *Memes* contain entertaining social messages, parodies, and satire. A *meme* is one of the phenomena of conveying messages in a new form by combining verbal language with nonverbal communication (expression) (Porubay & Sotvaldieva, 2022).

The term '*meme*' was first coined by Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist. The *meme* comes from the Greek, *mimeme* which means imitation. Said by Milner (2018) that *memes* are message-sending units and cultural imitation units that circulate from one human to another. *Memes* and genes evolve together. However, human culture evolves faster than human genes. The unit

for sending this message can be in the form of a song, fashion style, architecture, to the concept of divinity. Messaging units proliferate from generation to generation (Hussain *et al.*, 2018). Memes can be in the form of movies, videos, pictures, or just words or expressions. Apart from that, some creators create memes by combining several things, such as images accompanying text, while there are images adapted to video games, movies, celebrities, and the world of politics.

The strength of a *meme* lies in the creativity of the creator in combining text, images, videos, graphics, and various content so that it is easy for readers to understand. Osterroth (2020) gave opinion that *ein Mem kann beispielsweise ein Bild oder ein Video sein, eine Phrase, ein längerer Text, ein Dialogschema, ein Textstruktur oder ein immer wieder eingesetzter Rechtschreibfehler sein, im Grunde kann alles, was imitiert und variiert werden kann, zum Mem werden*. *Memes* according to Osterroth (2020) can be in the form of pictures or videos, phrases, longer texts, dialogue schemes, text structures, or spelling errors that are repeatedly used; anything that can be imitated and varied can become a *meme*.

There are so many memes circulating on social media, one of which is the meme about Covid-19 that is sweeping the world. Covid-19 is caused by a virus and is one of the worst pandemics in human history with such a high death rate. The Covid-19 virus outbreak occurred in early 2020. The virus then spread throughout the world. Since January 2020 WHO has declared that the world is experiencing a global pandemic emergency with the Covid-19 virus. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a change in lifestyle in the world community so many people are not prepared to adapt. This is the main cause of anxiety, stress, and panic among some people. Anxiety that arises varies, such as anxiety about contracting the Covid-19 virus, anxiety about weakening or even worsening financial conditions, and anxiety about the future after the pandemic is done (Kamil *et al.*, 2020).

Recent research shows that viewing funny *memes* can help people feel calmer and deal with stress due to the pandemic. There are lots of funny memes circulating on social media, so this meme can be used to help relieve stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is in line with the opinion of Myrick *et al.* (2022) and Valenzuela & Batinga (2021) that simply viewing *memes* can help people cope with the pressures of living during a global pandemic. In addition, people who see *memes* related to Covid-19 feel comfortable

and more confident in their ability to overcome this pandemic.

Other researchers also studied the usage of Covid-19 meme. A research by Torres-Marín *et al.* (2022) stated that according to the data collected during the third week of lockdown in Spain (from 26 to 31 March 2020). Their results suggest that intra-psychic humor styles were associated with better coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Structural equation modelling showed that self-enhancing and aggressive humor styles were related to perceiving COVID-19 as less psychologically threatening, which, in turn, was associated with a greater perceived funniness of COVID-19 memes, thus predicting higher levels of happiness. Their findings also suggest that humor styles aimed at boosting one's own self, irrespective of their potentially lighter or darker nature, may contribute to alleviating adverse psychological consequences arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The unique and intriguing characters of the *memes* that are spread on social media raise the question: what is the actual intention and purpose of the images, writings, or scenes of the characters contained in these *memes*? To answer this question, the researcher wants to observe and analyze the use of *memes* using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which aims to describe the signifiers and signifieds in the *Covid-19 meme* and explain the meaning contained in these *memes*. Many *Covid-19 memes* are circulating on social media.

Semiotics is a science or analytical method that examines signs. A sign is a symbol in the form of a clue to tell someone in search of an answer to that sign. In terms of Compagno (2018) semiotics is semiology, namely reconstruction that focuses more on the system of sign meanings than on language that specifically applies to structural activities according to the process. Semiotics is a scientific study or analytical method to examine signs in the context of scenarios, images, texts, and scenes in films that can be interpreted (Sinuraya *et al.*, 2022). Meaning means that objects do not only carry information, in this case, the objects want to communicate, but also constitute a structured system of signs used. Barthes' semiotic analysis refers to a sign system that generates meaning that will describe the meaning of denotation, connotation, and myth in several Covid-19 memes on social media.

The researcher thinks that it is important to analyze memes related to Covid-19 to discover

the meaning lies behind each meme and provide further information related to this matter for society because not all of them will understand the meaning of each memes. Furthermore, this research is hoped to give more information for other researcher to conduct a further research.

This researcher will try to discover the meaning lies behind memes related to Covid-19 using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. Thus, this research title is Using Semiotic Analysis to Analyze the Purpose of Creating Covid-19 Meme. By analyzing memes using this approach, the researcher will try to find the purposes of creating memes and the meaning behind them.

## METHOD

Qualitative research was used in this research. Moleong (2017) explained that qualitative research is research to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by research subjects as a whole using descriptions in the form of words and language, in the specific context experienced, and by utilizing various scientific methods. Qualitative research aims to produce descriptive analysis. The researcher tries to describe the facts behind the making of the *Covid-19 meme* circulating on social media.

Data collection techniques were carried out using library research and documentation. A literature study is a data collection technique by conducting a review study of books, literature, records, and reports that have something to do with the problem being solved (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Literature and documentation studies are carried out by selecting and collecting data by downloading and capturing screenshots of *memes* shared on social media and analyzing them.

The semiotic approach is qualitative-interpretive namely, a method that focuses on signs and texts as their study, as well as how researchers interpret and decode texts and signs themselves (Barbosa & Sales, 2022). Semiotics plays its role in every sign system, regardless of its substance and boundaries; images, gestures, tones, sounds, music, objects, settings, and even combinations of these, which form both conventional and contemporary entertainment content (Crow, 2022).

Semiotics is applied as a method to approach texts in the media with the assumption that the media itself is communicated through the sign elements it carries (Ibrahim & Sulaiman, 2020). The signs carried in the media are also loaded with certain interests which shows their complexity because signs in the media certainly

never carry a single meaning (Widiastuti *et al.*, 2020). The semiotic tradition consists of a set of theories about how signs represent ideas, situations, feelings, materials, and conditions beyond the signs themselves. Semiotic analysis is a method or way to analyze and give meaning to signs and objects contained in messages or texts (Siregar, 2022a). As a method of analysis,

semiotics is one of the most interpretive methods in analyzing a text and its success or failure as a method rests on how well researchers can articulate the cases they study (Leone *et al.*, 2020).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

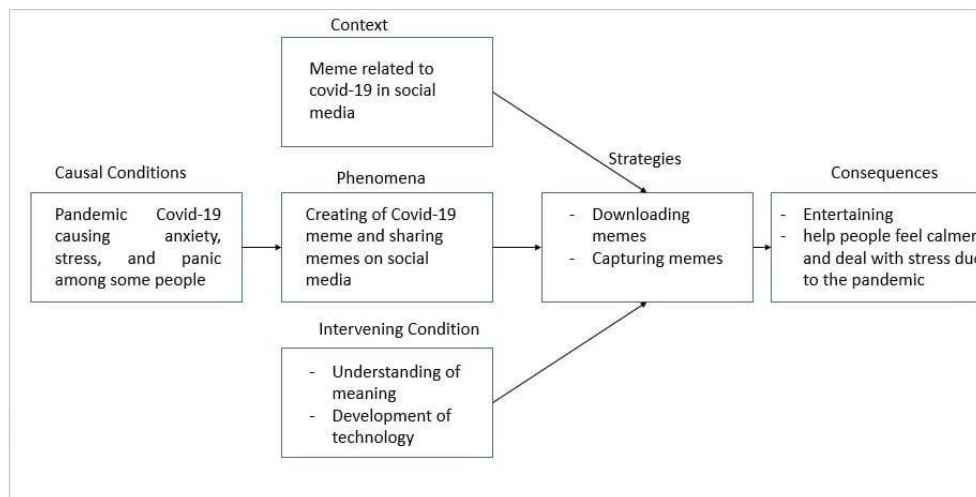


Figure 1. *Axial coding*


Semiotics is a science that studies signs (Siregar, 2022b). If related to memes, semiotics studies the function of image signs, namely how to understand the sign system that exists in memes that play a role in guiding readers to be able to capture the messages contained in them. Humans can only think and communicate using signs. The sign in question can be a visual sign that is non-verbal or verbal in nature.





Semiotics is the theory of analysis of various signs and meanings. How to interpret and examine the operation of a sign in forming a unity of meaning or signification. Semiotics analyzes a text or image to obtain information (Aiello, 2020). The study of semiotics considers that social phenomena in society and culture are signs. Semiotics studies systems, objects, and events that allow the sign to have meaning (Mikhaeil &

Baskerville, 2019). According to Van Wolde (2018), semiotics is a science or method of analysis to study signs. Signs are tools that we use in trying to find our way in the world, among humans, and with humans. Semiotics or in terms of Barthes semiology wants to study how humanity makes sense of things. Interpreting (tosinify) in this case cannot be confused with communicating (to communicate).

The results of this study are divided into two main parts, namely describing the *Covid-19 meme* markers and explaining the analysis and description of the types of semiotic markers that appear in the *Covid-19 memes*. In this study, there are 10 *memes*, each of which describes how difficult it is to face the Covid-19 pandemic. The following describes the results of the analysis of the data obtained.

Table 1, *Results of the analysis of the data obtained*

Data	Sign (Signified)	Marker (Signifier)	Translation	Symbol Meaning	Type of Sentence
1.	A woman dancing to <i>striptease</i> wearing full PPE.		Strip Club in 2020.	The first data indicates that during a pandemic situation, <i>Striptease</i> dancers also wore full PPE clothing when dancing at Strip Clubs.	From the syntactic point of view, it can be seen that the writing on the <i>meme</i> is made as 'satire'. The clothes of the <i>Striptease</i> dancers are similar to bikinis because, at this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the image of the dancers is wearing full PPE

<p>2. A woman is taking food or drinks in the refrigerator which is located in the kitchen.</p>		<p>First day of isolation. 30th day of isolation.</p>	<p>The second data marker is when the woman self-isolates during the pandemic, on the first day the woman's body is still slender, and on the 30th day of independent isolation, the woman's body becomes fat because she eats too much and does not do enough exercise.</p>	<p>Judging from the syntax, when people do isolation, they will gain weight after they finish isolating. This is because during isolation people go to the kitchen more often than usual, including checking the fridge and cupboards. They don't feel they put food in their mouths until they spend a lot of food.</p>
<p>3. A giraffe in the meadow.</p>		<p>Is the lockdown over?</p>	<p>The third data marker, namely that a giraffe became very fat after the lockdown ended, is the third image marker.</p>	<p>Through the syntax, it can be seen that during the lockdown, people rarely did activities outside the home. This causes them to feel anxious, depressed, and lonely, resulting in an increased appetite and resulting in weight gain.</p>
<p>4. Picture of a toddler laughing and crying.</p>		<p>When the coronavirus closes all school activities. Parents in the countryside and the city.</p>	<p>The fourth data marker is that during the Covid-19 pandemic, many schools closed and carried out distance learning. Parents of students who live in rural areas are certainly very happy because their children do not need to go to school and can help with their work, while parents who live in urban areas feel very sad because their children are just playing.</p>	<p>In terms of syntax, people living in rural areas are better than those living in cities. In villages, the spread of Covid-19 is lower considering that there are rarely gathering points for the community, whereas in cities there are many shopping centers and cinemas, so people gather more often so the spread of Covid-19 becomes faster. The people in the village can still work in the fields or the garden, so they are happier. During a pandemic, people who live in cities work from home and are prohibited from doing activities outside the home, so many of them feel stressed and depressed.</p>
<p>5. Toddlers sitting on the floor of their house without clothes.</p>		<p>Me after I ate all my quarantine snacks in one night.</p>	<p>The fifth data indicates that during the quarantine period, you are required to eat a lot to maintain the body's immunity. As a result, the weight increases.</p>	<p>In terms of syntax, it can be seen that during quarantine, it is easier for people to give up good habits, such as sports because the pandemic depression does not end soon. As a result, people eat more, and eventually, the scale needle tilts more to the right.</p>
<p>6. Bigfoot in a scene from the GTA game.</p>		<p>Social distancing champion.</p>	<p>The sixth data marker is that during a pandemic social distancing was enforced so that people in their activities always keep their distance from other people. This causes people to feel like they are not being cared for because they</p>	<p>From a syntactic point of view, social distancing is very necessary during a pandemic, namely to reduce the risk of transmission of the Covid-19 virus. Social distancing does not mean anti-social, so you look shabby and unkempt.</p>



			keep their distance from other people.		
7.	Birds are looking for food on the edge of the lake.		Online meeting. With videos. Only with audio.	The seventh data marker is that when holding online meetings or online lectures, sometimes people will look sober when they close the camera in an online application and will look neat when they turn on the camera.	From the syntactic point of view, when conducting online meetings, most people will look neat when they turn on the camera and will look sober when they don't turn on the camera. This often happens to people during a pandemic.
8.	Two actors are doing a scene in the movie Back to the Future.		Marty, no matter what, never Return to 2020!	The eighth data indicates that 2020 was a very difficult year because that year the Coronavirus first appeared which caused a change in the lifestyle of the world community so people did not want to return to 2020.	In terms of syntax, it can be seen that people generally do not want to return to 2020, because that year was the worst in world history. In 2020 many people died due to Covid-19 and the economy collapsed and many people lost their jobs.
9.	A mother with her three children in a room.		Work from home.	The ninth data marker is usually when working from home there are lots of distractions. This mother was working from home and her three children were always noisy, in the end, the children were bound hand and foot, and their mouths were covered with plaster.	In terms of syntax, it can be seen that when working from home you will encounter many distractions, including children who ask to play together or who are noisy with their brothers or sisters. To deal with this disturbance, a mother finally decided to tie her children's feet and hands.
10.	A man and dog are watching something.		That is for your good. You must stop touching your face.	The tenth data marker is a dog and its owner who wears a face shield, so that their hands don't touch their faces too often, considering that hands are a source of germs.	The syntactical aspect explains that during the pandemic season, washing hands is very mandatory, to prevent infection with the Coronavirus in yourself, your family, and those around you.

The existence of social media in people's lives makes social media a place to express opinions (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Nowadays, people often post various *meme* images, words, and even hashtags on their respective social media in expressing their views on Covid-19. On social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*, a *meme* can be replicated by someone and they can edit it according to the message they want to convey and then upload it to cyberspace. With a process like this, memes have become a means of exchanging ideas, discourse, and information that can be used by anyone (Harshavardhan *et al.*, 2019). Apart from that, memes are also a means of entertainment, and the functions of memes

vary, from wanting attention, sharing ideas, using memes to comment on/quip something, or can influence someone's mind (De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021).

Based on the *memes* above, it can be seen that in the first *meme*, there is a *meme* of a woman dancing to *Striptease* wearing full PPE clothes which has meaning during a pandemic situation, *Striptease* dancers also wear full PPE clothes when dancing in Strip Clubs. Based on the meme, it means that this virus has made everyone protecting themselves, including those who are striptease dancer. Striptease dancers are known to dance with bikini only. This delivers meaning that this virus is dangerous enough that made people

who do striptease dance covered themselves to prevent them from covid-19.

In the second *meme*, a woman is taking food or drink from the refrigerator which is located in the kitchen and has meaning when the woman is self-isolating during a pandemic, on the first day the woman's body is still slender, and on the 30th day of independent isolation, the woman's body becomes fat because too much to eat and lack of sports activities. In the third *meme*, a giraffe in the meadow which has the meaning that a giraffe gets very fat after the lockdown is over is the marker of the third *meme*. Both of the meme delivers the same messages. During the covid-19, most of the outdoor activities were limited. Even companies were applied the work from home program. Due to this limitation, most of people spent their time at home. Not much activities can be done, most of them spent their time with eating a lot of snack. Therefore, they gained weight a lot during covid-19. This meme related to the condition during Covid-19 and now seen as a humour.

The fourth *meme*, the *meme* of toddlers laughing and crying, means that during the Covid-19 pandemic, many schools were closed and carried out distance learning. Parents of students who live in rural areas are certainly very happy because their children do not need to go to school and can help with their work, while parents who live in urban areas feel very sad because their children are just playing. This condition related to the condition of the society during the covid-19. Parents also felt stressed because the responsibilities to teach their children concerning the school matters was shared with them.

In the fifth meme, there is a toddler meme sitting on the floor of his house without wearing clothes, which means that during quarantine you are required to eat a lot to maintain your body's immunity. As a result, the weight is increasing day by day. It delivers message for people to keep their body healthy and maintain their body's immunity to prevent from the viruses.

In the sixth meme, there is a Bigfoot *meme* in a scene in the GTA game which means that during the pandemic, *social distancing* was enforced, so that people in their activities always kept their distance from other people. This causes people to feel like they are not being cared for because they keep their distance from other people. It could be seen during the online meeting that was oftenly conducted during Covid-19. Most of the people only cared about their upper appearance, which was the only part that showed in the screen, while the rest of their appearance tended to be messy. In

addition, during Covid-19, there was not much out-door activities that needed people to dress-up nicely, that was one of the reasons why during the covid-19, people looked messy.

In the seventh meme, there is a meme of a bird looking for food by the lake, which means that when conducting online meetings or online lectures, sometimes people will look sober when they close the camera on an online application and will look neat when they turn on the camera. In the eighth *meme*, there is a picture of two actors doing a scene in the movie *Back to the Future*, which means that 2020 is a very tough year because that year the Coronavirus first appeared which caused a change in the lifestyle of the world's people, so people do not want to go back to 2020. In the ninth meme, there is a meme of a mother with her three children in a room, and it has the meaning that usually when working from home there are lots of distractions. This mother was working from home and her three children were always noisy, in the end, the children were bound hand and foot, and their mouths were covered with plaster. Of course, this was not intended to hurt his children, but only to teach them a lesson so that later when the mother is working from home, they will not do the same commotion again. These memes deliver meaning that Covid-19 was a tough condition because they were not only limited in doing activities, they also faced problems doing their job from home. For students, some parents may intervere their children by asking them doing some chores, while for parents, children tended to distract their parents because of their loud voice.

From this research, it can be seen that the *Covid-19 memes* were made by creators with a specific purpose. The signs used, the choice of diction used, the aesthetics of the images chosen, and the strings of sentences used are carefully thought out so that the goals intended by the creators can be achieved. In general, *Covid-19 memes* aim to help relieve stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. Seeing funny *memes* that are spreading on social media can help someone feel calmer and overcome depression due to the pandemic that has hit (Bauer & Ngondo, 2022). The emotional level becomes lower by viewing *memes*.

*Signified* which is used in the *Covid-19 meme* is very easy to understand and interesting according to the intended signifier. The signifiers underlying the *Covid-19 meme* include scenes from the famous movie *Back to the Future* and scenes from the *GTA game*. The words contained

in the *meme* describe various kinds of satire during the pandemic because many people are struggling and surviving during the pandemic. A *signified* that is made is equipped with a sentence as a sign. The contents of the *signified Covid-19 meme* can represent the feelings of someone who is facing a pandemic so that the message that the creator hopes for can be conveyed to the reader. In addition, in terms of sentences, the *Covid-19 meme* contains sentences containing information and expressions of feelings.

The development of internet technology is increasingly advanced, now people can communicate quickly with the help of the internet without having to meet face to face, especially through social media. For *memes*, communication is a way to expand itself toward other thoughts. Conditions like this eventually paved the way for memes to grow, shifting from conventional ways of communication to more advanced ways by updating themselves to become *internet memes*. An *internet meme* is something that becomes famous through the internet. Like pictures, videos, or even people. Internet memes are created through a process of imitation and photographic modification of existing ones. Creators must be observant in observing social events that are currently happening in society. Foresight is needed to find small things that can be used as objects. It is done so that the messages conveyed by *internet meme* creators to *internet meme* connoisseurs can be conveyed in entertaining and effective ways.

## CONCLUSION

*Signifiers* found in *meme Covid-19* such: there are snippets of famous movie scenes and games. The insinuations in the sentences are also very true to reality. The sentences provide statements that contain information and contain expressions of feelings from creators as fighters during the global Covid-19 pandemic.

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