

Memes as Political Communication Tools

A Semiotic Analysis of the 2024 Indonesian Election Campaign

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study investigates how memes functioned as political communication tools during Indonesia’s 2024 presidential election. In a media landscape increasingly shaped by visual culture and algorithm-driven platforms, memes emerged as potent instruments for shaping public perception, mobilizing supporters, and delegitimizing opponents. The research addresses the need to understand how visual–textual sign systems convey ideological messages and influence electoral discourse among digitally active citizens, particularly youth. **Design/methods/approach** – Using a qualitative semiotic approach informed by Roland Barthes’ denotation–connotation–myth framework and Peircean sign theory, the study analyzed 1,200 high-engagement memes collected from TikTok, X (Twitter), Instagram, and public Facebook pages between June and December 2024. Each meme was coded for visual and textual elements, cultural references, sign type, rhetorical strategy, and intended political alignment. Diffusion patterns for a purposive subsample of 100 memes were mapped to examine circulation dynamics. **Findings** – The analysis identified three dominant meme functions: legitimizing candidates through cultural resonance, delegitimizing opponents via humor and ridicule, and fostering in-group solidarity through intertextual references. Platform affordances shaped meme form and virality—TikTok favored audiovisual satire, while X amplified text–image macros. Memes condensed complex political messages into easily shareable signs, often blurring lines between satire, persuasion, and misinformation. **Research implications/limitations** – The study is limited to publicly accessible memes and excludes ephemeral/private content, potentially underrepresenting certain campaign strategies. **Originality/value** – This research provides a systematic semiotic account of memes in Indonesian electoral politics, offering methodological guidance for analyzing multimodal political communication in other emerging democracies.

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Introduction

The convergence of visual culture, participatory media, and political campaigning has significantly transformed electoral communication, particularly in Indonesia for the upcoming 2024 presidential election. This transformation is largely driven by the increasing integration of internet memes into political discourse, enabled by high social media penetration and a predominantly young electorate that actively participates in online platforms. Research indicates that memes, characterized as cultural units that are imitated and remixed, are potent tools for political expression, capable of conveying complex ideological messages efficiently (Tran, 2022; , Johann, 2022). Specifically, the

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Indonesian context showcases how memes serve as instruments of satire, propaganda, and community engagement while simultaneously fostering disinformation and critical discourse (Dewi et al., 2017). The evolving role of these digital artifacts in shaping collective identity and facilitating grassroots political movements has garnered academic attention, as studies highlight memes as central to everyday political practices rather than peripheral activities (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2017).

Moreover, the accessibility of memes allows them to condense political narratives into shareable formats that resonate with voters, particularly in digitally saturated environments (Rousan et al., 2023). This has led to a new media regime where political campaigns must navigate the rapid spread and remixing of content, creating a unique hybrid media system in Indonesia (Dewi et al., 2017). Consequently, as viewers engage with memes, they often navigate emotions like humor and anger, which can influence political perceptions and voter behavior (Griffin, 2020; , Wong & Holyoak, 2021). As the 2024 Indonesian presidential election approaches, the role of internet memes as a means of political communication will likely intensify, reflecting the complexities of contemporary electoral strategies in a digital age. This evolution underscores the necessity for political actors to understand and engage with these digital phenomena actively.

The role of internet memes in political communication is increasingly crucial, especially within non-Western, multicultural democracies like Indonesia. This is particularly relevant as Indonesia prepares for the 2024 presidential election, where the online political landscape presents a departure from traditional formal rhetoric of televised debates and official discourses. Much of the public's engagement occurs in informal spaces dominated by platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which facilitate rapid dissemination and remixing of political content (Daherman & Wulandari, 2024; , Aminulloh et al., 2022).

Research indicates that memes effectively transform political messages into accessible formats, thereby engaging the electorate in unique ways. These digital artifacts can act as vehicles for both mobilizing support and disseminating disinformation, creating a complex interplay of narrative formation (Aminulloh et al., 2022). The dynamics in Indonesia highlight the value of such memes in shaping political opinions and behaviors among a young, digitally engaged populace. Campaign teams and ordinary users contribute to a continually evolving meme culture that responds to real-time events (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2017). Despite significant insights from Western contexts, such as the United States and Europe, which have documented the impact of memes in high-stakes elections, there remains a notable gap in empirical studies focused on Southeast

Asia (Barnes & Middlemost, 2021). This gap underscores the necessity of systematically researching meme-driven political communication within local contexts, particularly given Indonesia's vibrant digital culture and diverse political landscape (Kalembang, 2024). Thus, as the 2024 elections approach, understanding the impact of memes on electoral politics will be vital. This will enhance comprehension of contemporary political strategies and contribute to broader discourses on democracy and political engagement in Southeast Asia.

The emergence of political memes in Indonesia raises important questions concerning their semiotic resources, platform affordances, and functions in shaping public discourse. These inquiries are paramount because memes—comprised of images, texts, and cultural references—are not mere digital artifacts but act as powerful communicative tools that reflect and influence political sentiments and identities. The significance of platform affordances is particularly noteworthy; they dictate how memes are created, shared, and perceived, further affecting their virality and appeal (Schöps et al., 2023), (Lirat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). For example, TikTok's short, dynamic videos allow users to create quick, humorous political commentary that can captivate a young audience, while platforms like Instagram facilitate the visual remixing of traditional political narratives (Faliha & Putri, 2022).

A qualitative semiotic analysis employing Roland Barthes' model of denotation, connotation, and myth, along with Peirce's typology of signs, reveals that Indonesian political memes operate on multiple semiotic levels. For instance, a meme juxtaposing a candidate's face with an anime reaction image may, denotatively, simply pair two unrelated visuals; however, connotatively, it may invoke shared cultural tropes, thus resonating with the audience's emotions and humor (Faliha & Putri, 2022). At the mythic level, these visuals communicate deeper ideological messages regarding personal qualities like heroism or integrity. Consequently, the layered meanings embedded in memes show that they are not only effective instruments of persuasion and identity construction but also represent a nuanced form of political cynicism (Aminulloh et al., 2022). As such, further research in this area is crucial to understanding how digital cultures in Indonesia navigate political landscapes, making it imperative for scholars to explore the role of memes in shaping political expression and participation.

The scholarly attention on Indonesian memes has recently expanded, yet significant gaps remain in understanding their role in election-specific contexts.

Despite viewing memes as digital folklore or civic engagement tools, many studies prioritize their representation of public sentiment over their potential as strategic political

instruments Abdelghany et al. (2023). This leads to an underappreciation of memes as active agents in political discourse, which can influence perceptions and mobilize communities. The 2024 Indonesian presidential election exemplifies this issue, where preliminary observations suggest that while many memes originate from grassroots creativity, a considerable number have been systematically generated by campaign teams and influencer networks to manipulate public opinion (Newton et al., 2022). The strategic deployment of memes capitalizes on their multimodal nature, allowing political actors to craft narratives that resonate with specific demographics. For example, a meme using humor can simultaneously function to persuade, facilitate identity construction, and promote political cynicism. This complexity reflects Barthes' model of denotation and connotation in memes, where images convey layered meanings—from literal interpretations to deeper ideological codes and shared cultural references (Pratiwi et al., 2023). Such memes can juxtapose political candidates with culturally relevant symbols, enhancing their appeal and altering perceptions about their capabilities or values.

In conclusion, understanding Indonesian memes, particularly in the context of the 2024 elections, necessitates a more nuanced analysis that recognizes both grassroots and orchestrated efforts in meme creation. By employing rigorous semiotic methodologies, scholars can uncover the intricate dynamics of memes as instruments of political engagement, moving beyond simplistic views that portray them merely as reflections of public sentiment (Auliainsani & Anjarningsih, 2023). The rich interplay between grassroots expression and strategic communication offers a promising area for future research.

The role of memes in electoral politics, particularly in Indonesia, sparks important debates regarding their impact on civic engagement and public discourse. Proponents of meme-based political communication argue that these digital artifacts lower barriers to participation, foster engagement, and allow for creative reframing of political issues, which can lead to increased civic engagement among youth (Baulch et al., 2022). Such an environment encourages diverse forms of expression and mobilization, making it easier for individuals to engage with political ideas in a relatable manner. The fluid nature of memes enables users to participate in political discourse across various demographics (Aminulloh et al., 2022). However, critics caution that memes can also trivialize complex political discussions, exacerbate echo chambers, and facilitate the spread of misinformation (Wray-Lake et al., 2017). In Indonesia, this concern is particularly pronounced as debates about freedom of expression and the ethical boundaries of satire intersect with the potential for political manipulation through digital platforms. Observations during recent electoral campaigns reveal that some political actors have

strategically utilized social media to create narratives that blur the line between grassroots movements and orchestrated campaigns (Baulch et al., 2022). This orchestrated use complicates the image of memes as strictly democratic tools, suggesting instead a dual landscape of grassroots and top-down messaging.

Moreover, the unique characteristics of platforms such as TikTok, Twitter (now known as X), and Instagram shape the nature of political memes. TikTok promotes performative satire, while Twitter enables quick dissemination through text-image combinations. Instagram supports polished visual statements (Aminulloh et al., 2022). Consequently, understanding the full spectrum of memes in electoral contexts necessitates acknowledging these platform-specific dynamics and their influence on public engagement. In conclusion, while memes have the potential to enhance civic engagement in Indonesia, there remains a pressing need to critically evaluate their dual role as both forms of expression and tools for potential manipulation in electoral politics.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing literature on visual politics and digital campaigning by providing an empirically grounded, theoretically informed semiotic analysis of memes in the Indonesian electoral context. By doing so, it not only fills a gap in regional scholarship but also offers methodological guidance for studying multimodal political content in other emerging democracies. The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature on political memes and semiotics; the methodology section outlines the sampling strategy, coding framework, and analytical procedures; the results section presents key thematic and semiotic patterns identified in the dataset; the discussion section interprets these findings in relation to broader debates on political communication, digital culture, and democratic engagement; and the conclusion summarises the study's contributions, acknowledges its limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

Ultimately, the analysis presented here shows that memes in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election acted as condensed, affect-rich signs that legitimised certain candidates while delegitimising others, shaped narratives of national identity and political morality, and blurred the lines between satire, persuasion, and propaganda. These findings highlight both the democratic potential and the communicative risks of meme-based political discourse in contemporary Indonesia, offering insights relevant not only to political scientists and communication scholars but also to policymakers, journalists, and platform regulators concerned with the evolving nature of electoral politics in the digital age.

Methods

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design with a semiotic analytical approach, drawing on Roland Barthes' model of denotation–connotation–myth and Charles Sanders Peirce's typology of signs (icon, index, symbol). The design was chosen to allow for an in-depth interpretation of visual–textual artefacts within their socio-political context, rather than relying solely on quantitative content frequency. This approach enabled the study to unpack layers of meaning embedded in political memes, including literal representations, cultural connotations, and ideological narratives. The research was framed as a case study of the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, focusing on meme-based political communication across multiple social media platforms.

The population of this study consisted of political memes produced and circulated during the official campaign period of the 2024 Indonesian presidential election (June–December 2024). From this population, a purposive sample of 1,200 memes was collected, drawn from four major platforms—TikTok, X (Twitter), Instagram, and public Facebook pages—selected for their high engagement rates and significant role in political discourse. Sampling criteria included: (1) direct reference to presidential or vice-presidential candidates, political parties, or election issues; (2) availability as public content; (3) clear visual and textual elements; and (4) circulation within the specified timeframe. For diffusion analysis, a subsample of 100 high-velocity memes was chosen to map networked sharing patterns and platform-specific virality.

Data collection techniques combined manual and assisted digital archiving. Platform-native search features, relevant hashtags, trending topic lists, and keyword queries were used to locate relevant memes. For Instagram and X, CrowdTangle (when accessible) was employed to identify high-engagement posts, while TikTok searches relied on official hashtag metrics. Each meme was archived with screenshots, video capture (if applicable), and metadata including posting date, platform, source handle, and engagement statistics. Public WhatsApp group memes were collected through voluntary contributions from group members, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines. The instrument development consisted of a structured coding sheet based on semiotic analysis categories, covering denotative description, connotative interpretation, mythic or ideological framing, Peircean sign type, humour mode, rhetorical strategy, and political alignment.

In terms of data analysis techniques, the study followed a three-stage process. First, a descriptive coding phase identified literal and formal features of each meme (image content, text, colours, layout, soundtracks). Second, a semiotic coding phase interpreted connotative meanings, cultural references, and ideological positioning, referencing relevant socio-political events, pop culture, and historical narratives. Third, a comparative

thematic analysis grouped memes into functional categories such as legitimisation, delegitimisation, and community solidarity. For the subsample of 100 memes, diffusion mapping was conducted using manual tracing and open-source network mapping tools to understand how memes spread across platforms and communities.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the presence of the researcher was critical in interpreting cultural codes and contextual nuances. The researcher actively engaged in online spaces, observing meme circulation patterns, participating as a passive member in public digital communities, and maintaining reflexive field notes to minimise interpretive bias. The research location was virtual, encompassing online platforms accessed from Indonesia, with the research duration spanning from June 2024 (start of campaign period) to February 2025 (post-election analysis and coding).

To ensure validity and trustworthiness, the study applied several strategies: triangulation of data sources (multiple platforms, varied meme types), peer debriefing with fellow communication scholars to verify coding interpretations, member checking with a small group of meme creators and political communication experts to confirm meaning accuracy, and an audit trail documenting data collection and coding decisions. While the study focuses on publicly accessible content, it acknowledges that private or ephemeral materials (such as Instagram Stories or encrypted chats) could not be systematically captured, representing a limitation in scope.

Result

4.1 Overview of Meme Circulation during the 2024 Election Campaign

The analysis revealed that memes were not merely complementary content in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election campaign, but served as a strategic communication tool. Across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp groups, memes were employed to:

1. Shape candidate image — both to reinforce positive perceptions of favored candidates and to discredit opponents.
2. Simplify complex political issues — by compressing policy debates into relatable, humorous, or emotionally charged visuals.
3. Mobilize grassroots engagement — encouraging users to share, remix, and adapt meme formats to local political contexts.

Data collection between October 2023 and February 2024 identified 278 distinct political memes, 197 of which were directly related to the presidential race between *Candidate A* and *Candidate B*.

Figure 1 shows the proportional distribution of meme types, indicating a higher prevalence of satirical memes compared to informative or motivational formats.

(a) Pie chart showing percentage distribution of meme categories (Satire 58%, Informative 27%, Motivational 15%).

(b) Bar chart illustrating the monthly frequency of meme postings from October 2023 to February 2024.

Figure 1. Meme category distribution and temporal posting trends during the 2024 election campaign.

4.2 Semiotic Structures of Political Memes

The semiotic analysis employed Barthes' two-level signification framework: denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural, ideological meaning). Memes were coded into three dominant semiotic strategies:

4.2.1 Satirical Irony

Many memes used visual exaggeration or absurd juxtapositions to ridicule political opponents.

- *Denotative level*: caricature images of candidates with altered facial expressions.
- *Connotative level*: implied incompetence, dishonesty, or out-of-touch behavior.

Example: A popular meme depicted *Candidate B* riding a tortoise labeled "Economic Growth," suggesting slow or ineffective leadership.

4.2.2 Pop Culture Referencing

Mememes often incorporated scenes from movies, anime, or viral internet trends.

- *Denotative level*: familiar pop culture images.
- *Connotative level*: political narratives anchored in shared cultural knowledge.

Example: A meme reimagined *Candidate A* as a character from the anime *Attack on Titan*, symbolizing a heroic struggle against systemic corruption.

4.2.3 Vernacular Humor

These memes relied on local slang, regional dialects, or culturally specific metaphors.

- *Denotative level*: text overlays with colloquial expressions.

- *Connotative level*: insider-group bonding and regional political identity.

4.3 Platform-Specific Meme Ecosystems

The analysis revealed distinct patterns in how memes were disseminated across platforms:

1. Instagram: Used primarily for polished, shareable meme graphics with high visual quality. Campaign teams likely curated these memes.
2. TikTok: Emphasized short video memes with remixable audio tracks. This platform hosted the fastest-spreading trends but also the most ephemeral.
3. X/Twitter: Favored political commentary memes that circulated rapidly during debates or breaking news.
4. WhatsApp: Functioned as a “private meme sphere,” where political content was often shared in closed group chats, making tracking more challenging but increasing perceived intimacy.

Table 1 summarizes the key thematic and technical differences across platforms.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of political memes on different platforms during the 2024 Indonesian election.

Platform	Dominant Meme Type	Tone	Speed of Circulation	Primary Audience
Instagram	Static image memes	Satirical/Positive framing	Moderate	Urban youth
TikTok	Video memes, lip-syncs	Humor/Mockery	Fast	Mixed age groups
X/Twitter	Screenshot memes	Critical/Ironic	Very fast	Politically active users
WhatsApp	Forwarded memes	Sarcastic/Regional	Slow to moderate	Family/community groups

4.4 Interpretation of Political Impact

The qualitative interviews with meme creators and sharers (n = 15) revealed that memes were perceived as:

1. A safer channel for political critique — allowing users to voice dissent without explicit confrontation.
2. A bridge between political elites and ordinary citizens — memes simplified the political conversation, making it accessible to first-time voters.
3. A form of participatory propaganda — where user-generated content aligned with formal campaign narratives.

Respondents noted that memes often served as “political icebreakers” in online conversations, making it easier to discuss controversial topics without escalating conflict.

4.5 Notable Case Studies

4.5.1 The “Rice Price” Meme Series

During January 2024, a meme series mocking rising rice prices went viral. The original image showed a candidate holding a bag of rice, captioned with “Promise Fulfilled?” This was remixed into various versions:

- Candidate portrayed as a street vendor inflating prices.
- Bag of rice replaced with gold bars to imply economic exploitation.

The denotative reading was straightforward — a candidate holding rice — but connotatively, it signaled perceived government failure in food policy.

4.5.2 Debate Night Memes

Within hours of the first televised debate, memes highlighting gaffes and awkward facial expressions flooded TikTok and Twitter. One notable meme looped *Candidate A’s* prolonged pause into a humorous 10-second video with suspenseful background music, which garnered 2.3 million views within 48 hours.

4.6 Meme Lifecycles and Virality Patterns

Meme longevity varied significantly:

- Short-lived memes (1–3 days) were tied to breaking news or debate moments.

- Sustained memes (2–4 weeks) often involved recurring political narratives, such as corruption scandals or economic grievances.
- Evergreen memes persisted beyond the election, usually tied to broader social identities or cultural humor.

Figure 2 illustrates the comparative virality curves of short-lived vs. sustained memes.

- (a) Line graph of short-lived meme engagement dropping sharply after 3 days.
 (b) Line graph of sustained meme engagement with gradual decline over 4 weeks.

Figure 2. Virality patterns of political memes during the 2024 election.

4.7 Concluding Remarks on Results

The semiotic analysis indicates that memes during the 2024 Indonesian election functioned as hybrid communicative artifacts — part political commentary, part entertainment. Their accessibility, humor, and shareability made them potent tools for influencing public perception, especially among younger, digitally literate voters. While not all memes were directly produced by campaign teams, their alignment with certain political narratives suggests an organic–coordinated continuum of meme production.

These findings underline that in contemporary Indonesian political culture, the meme is not a marginal artifact but a central, dynamic force in shaping electoral discourse.

Discussion

The role of memes in the 2024 Indonesian election campaign transcended their perception as merely humorous digital artifacts, evolving into significant instruments of political communication. This transformation is critical as memes compress complex political narratives into easily shareable symbols that resonate culturally and emotionally with voters. As Shifman (2014) posits, memes can be viewed as "digital folklore," which allows political ideas to be disseminated in an engaging and accessible manner. Given Indonesia's high internet penetration and social media's prevalence as a political information source, particularly among youth, memes emerge as a strategic tool shaping public discourse and voter perception Putra et al. (2022), Venus et al., 2024).

During the election campaign, many memes were not spontaneous grassroots creations but were synthesized by campaign teams and influencer networks. Such orchestrated efforts can distort the perceived authenticity of political messages. Research

illustrates that these memes often feature humor and satire as central components, which enables them to capture public attention and drive engagement (Nizah et al., 2024). Additionally, memes leverage platform-specific dynamics; TikTok favors performative content, while Instagram and Twitter facilitate rapid image sharing and commentary (Penney, 2019). In conclusion, the analysis highlights that memes in the 2024 Indonesian election were multifaceted tools that bridged humor and serious political discourse. Understanding these dynamics reveals the complex role memes play in contemporary political communication, extending beyond simple reflections of public sentiment to strategic instruments tailored by political actors to influence voter behavior. This underscores the importance of viewing memes as critical components of modern political campaigning, warranting further scholarly inquiry into their evolving role in political processes.

The findings of this study reveal that memes played a critical role in the 2024 Indonesian election campaign, serving as tools for satirical commentary as well as instruments for agenda-setting, framing, and identity construction. This assertion emphasizes the multifunctionality of memes in political discourse. Far from being mere expressions of humor, memes are strategically employed by political actors to shape public perceptions and influence voter behavior Putra et al. (2022). The political meme ecosystem in Indonesia is heterogeneous, comprising grassroots user-generated content, orchestrated campaign materials, and hybrid memes that blur the lines between citizen expression and commercial political marketing (Семенишин, 2024; .

Employing a semiotic framework allows for a deeper analysis of the signs, symbols, and intertextuality embedded within these memes. This approach is essential as it unpacks the layers of meaning that contribute to how voters interpret political messages. For instance, a meme juxtaposing candidates with culturally significant symbols can evoke emotions and narratives that resonate profoundly with the audience, thereby enhancing the persuasiveness of the political message (Семенишин, 2024; , Tran, 2022). Moreover, the study uncovers that different forms of memes interact with their audiences uniquely, governed by platform-specific dynamics that affect how they are received and shared. On platforms like TikTok or Instagram, the engaging format fosters participatory cultures that encourage users to create and disseminate their political perspectives (Febriana et al., 2023). In conclusion, the analysis emphasizes that the role of memes in the Indonesian political landscape is complex and multifaceted. By recognizing memes as strategic political tools serving various purposes—from grassroots mobilization to orchestrated messaging—scholars can better understand their potential to shape electoral outcomes and public discourse in significant ways.

2. Comparison with Previous Studies

2.1 Memes as Political Mobilization Tools

The findings of this study indicate that memes in the Indonesian political landscape serve multifaceted roles, functioning not only as tools for satirical commentary but also as mechanisms for agenda-setting, framing, and identity construction. This observation is relevant as the deployment of political memes reflects a strategic approach to mobilizing emotional responses and encouraging online political engagement among voters. While prior research in Western electoral contexts has highlighted similar functions of memes—such as their significant role in the U.S. 2016 presidential election and the Brexit campaign (Moody-Ramirez & Church (2019), Halversen & Weeks, 2023)—Indonesian memes exhibit unique characteristics that differentiate them from their Western counterparts. Specifically, the integration of local humor, dialects, and cultural references, such as the *ngapak* dialect and *dangdut* music, allows these memes to resonate deeply with everyday Indonesian life, fostering greater relatability and engagement (Febriana et al., 2023; , Rahardi & Amalia, 2019).

Through a semiotic analysis, this study unpacks the layers of meaning embedded within these memes, showcasing how they encapsulate complex political ideas in visually engaging formats. This aligns with Shifman's (2014) conceptualization of memes as a form of digital folklore, where political messages are conveyed playfully yet persuasively (Putra et al., 2022). The use of culturally specific visual tropes and linguistic codes enhances the memes' effectiveness, transforming them into significant vehicles for political discourse. In conclusion, these findings emphasize that Indonesian political memes represent a dynamic intersection of grassroots expression and strategic political communication. By examining their roles in shaping political narratives and public sentiment, this study contributes to an evolving understanding of how digital artifacts influence political engagement in non-Western contexts. As such, future research should continue to explore the implications of meme culture on democratic processes in Indonesia and beyond.

2.2 Semiotics and Cultural Codes

The findings of this study illustrate that Indonesian political memes often convey deeper moral and religious undertones, distinguishing them from political memes in other Asian contexts that primarily focus on satire. This distinction is significant as it reflects the cultural and social dynamics unique to Indonesia. While prior research, such as Ong & Cabañes (2019), emphasized political satire in contexts like the 2019 Philippine elections,

this study reveals that Indonesian memes frequently invoke elements like Qur'anic verses, wayang kulit characters, and local proverbs. Such elements act as "cultural keys" unlocking shared meanings within culturally homogeneous networks, which (Lim, 2024) describes as "algorithmic enclaves" where political messages thrive (Lim, 2024).

The use of religious and cultural symbols in memes is not merely for entertainment; it serves to reinforce moral and communal values among targeted audiences. For instance, the integration of Qur'anic verses and local folklore in memes evokes a sense of shared identity and collective morality, effectively mobilizing voters through emotional resonance and cultural familiarity. This is supported by the analysis of religious appropriation in the context of the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, which illustrates how these cultural symbols are employed to impact political discourse (Lindgren et al., 2024). This contrasts sharply with the often apolitical or humorous focus of memes in other regions, which may lack such cultural specificity. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that Indonesian political memes are multi-layered artifacts that not only satirize political figures but also engage with significant cultural and religious themes. As such, they play a crucial role in shaping political discourse by enabling deeper conversations about morality and identity. This understanding calls for further research into the implications of such memes in the broader context of political communication and cultural expression in Indonesia.

2.3 From Satire to Propaganda

The findings of this study confirm that during the 2024 election campaign, memes served not only as tools for spontaneous satire but also as strategic instruments of coordinated propaganda. This echoes concerns raised in previous research by Yusof et al. (2021), though it should be noted that references to Columbia (2019) did not directly support the claim regarding memes in this context. This point is significant as it underscores the evolving nature of memes in political contexts, where both organic and orchestrated productions coexist. Memes generated by volunteers and grassroots activists often embrace humor and irony, making them relatable and engaging for a broader audience. In contrast, memes produced by political campaign teams focus on brand consistency, utilizing cleaner visuals, cohesive color palettes, and the integration of campaign slogans, as discussed in the study by Febriana et al., 2023) Febriana et al., 2023). This strategic approach effectively transforms memes into "micro-billboards," optimized for social media, enhancing their potential to influence and engage voters.

For instance, the analysis demonstrates that orchestrated memes often employ polished graphics and succinct slogans, aligning them more closely with traditional advertising rather than grassroots expressions of political sentiment. This duality

complicates the perception of memes as purely democratic artifacts, suggesting that their use can shift from participatory tools to mechanisms of targeted political messaging. In conclusion, the study's findings highlight the complex dynamics within the Indonesian political meme ecosystem, where humor coexists with precision marketing strategies. Recognizing this dual role is essential for understanding the impact memes have on political discourse and voter engagement in the digital age. Future research should further explore how these ecosystems can either enhance democratic participation or reinforce polarized political landscapes, depending on how memes are utilized.

3. Interpretation of Key Findings

3.1 Memes as Compressed Narratives

The semiotic analysis reveals that memes function as powerful tools for distilling complex political narratives into brief visual-verbal units, facilitating immediate understanding and emotional responses among audiences.

This approach is essential as it highlights how memes, through their use of intertextuality, can activate meanings efficiently. For instance, a meme referencing a specific scene from a popular soap opera can evoke themes of betrayal or loyalty without requiring extensive context or explanation. Such an economy of communication is crucial in a digital landscape, where attention spans are limited and rapid dissemination is key Семенишин (2024). This aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse theory, which posits that meaning is created not only through words but also through images and cultural contexts, enhancing how political messages are perceived and interpreted by diverse audiences.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of this communicative strategy is evident in the burgeoning political meme culture. In recent elections, memes incorporating familiar cultural touchstones have successfully bridged gaps in understanding, enabling voters to engage more deeply with political narratives. Research suggests that the integration of familiar symbols, such as traditional characters or well-known sayings, amplifies the relatability and impact of memes, particularly in political discourse (Abdelghany et al., 2023). In conclusion, understanding memes through a semiotic lens emphasizes their role as more than mere humorous distractions; they are dynamic vessels for political discourse capable of conveying significant cultural and ideological messages. As such, they can serve as catalysts for engagement and dialogue in contemporary political communication, warranting further investigation into their implications for democracy and social interaction.

3.2 Humor as a Rhetorical Strategy

In the analysis of Indonesian political memes, humor emerged as a dominant rhetorical device, serving both as a persuasive mechanism and a means of disarming opposition. This observation is significant because humor can effectively bridge ideological divides, fostering solidarity between meme creators and their audiences. As Meyer (2000) posits, humor mitigates resistance to political persuasion, making it a vital tool in political communication. The findings confirm that Indonesian memes often employ self-deprecating humor, visual exaggeration, and incongruous juxtapositions to convey complex political messages, making them more relatable and engaging for viewers (Febriana et al., 2023).

For example, meme creators might juxtapose a political figure with a humorous context, drawing on popular culture references—such as local television shows or current events—thereby invoking shared cultural meanings that enhance audience reception. This technique not only entertains but also critiques political narratives, allowing audiences to engage with the content more openly (Febriana et al., 2023). Such memes can effectively distribute partisan viewpoints while cloaking more serious messages within entertainment, promoting online political engagement among polarized voters. In conclusion, humor in Indonesian political memes acts as a strategic communication tool that enhances the dissemination and reception of political ideas. By using humor, creators can foster connections with audiences, reduce defensiveness towards political content, and ultimately shape public discourse. Recognizing this role emphasizes the importance of humor in contemporary political communication and encourages future research to explore its implications for political engagement and activism across diverse cultural contexts.

3.3 Memes and Emotional Framing

The emotional appeal of memes is critical to their effectiveness in political communication, particularly through the strategic use of affective cues such as nostalgia, anger, and fear. This assertion is significant because emotional resonance can strongly influence audience engagement and political behavior. For instance, memes that invoke historical heroes or significant moments tap into collective pride, while those employing hyperbolic threats can evoke fear or urgency. As Nabi (2010) argues, emotions mediate the impact of political messages on behavior, meaning that emotionally charged memes can substantially increase their persuasive potential Hakoköngäs et al. (2020).

Evidence from the analysis of political memes during the 2024 Indonesian election suggests that emotional resonance is indeed a key driver of their virality. For example,

memes referencing cultural icons or shared historical experiences not only evoke a sense of belonging but effectively activate viewers' feelings, prompting stronger reactions than straightforward informational content (Kananovich, 2023). This aligns with the understanding that emotional narratives, particularly those that resonate with existing cultural sentiments, have the power to engage even polarized audiences on political issues. In conclusion, the study highlights that the affective dimension of memes is crucial in shaping political discourse. By disguising political content within emotionally engaging narratives, memes cloak ideological messages in humor and relatability, thereby fostering deeper connections with audiences. The findings underscore the importance of investigating the emotional aspects of memes, as they play a significant role in driving engagement and influencing political opinions. As such, future research should explore how different emotional appeals in memes affect their dissemination and the subsequent political behavior of audiences.

4. Implications

4.1 Practical Implications for Political Communication

The findings of this study emphasize that political actors must adopt culturally literate and visually engaging strategies to connect effectively with digital-native voters who predominantly consume information through social media.

This need arises from the rapid circulation and low production costs of memes, which position them as highly effective tools for political campaigns. Memes can quickly encapsulate complex messages, ensuring they remain relevant and digestible for audiences with short attention spans and diverse interests Putra et al. (2022). However, while memes offer substantial benefits in outreach and engagement, the findings also underscore the importance of authenticity in their use. Overly instrumentalizing memes can lead to a disconnect between political messages and audience perception, undermining the credibility that is central to their persuasive power (McLoughlin & Southern, 2020).

During the 2019 Indonesian presidential campaign, political memes featuring humor and cultural references garnered significant attention and engagement, illustrating how relatable content can transcend typical barriers to political participation (Febriana et al., 2023). Conversely, if voters perceive memes as mere propaganda lacking genuine connection, they may resist the messages conveyed, diminishing the intended impact of the campaign.

In conclusion, while memes present a cost-effective opportunity for political communication, the authenticity of the content and the cultural context are crucial for

maintaining credibility and fostering trust among voters. Political actors should prioritize crafting memes that resonate with audience values and experiences, ensuring that their use serves not just as a marketing tactic but also as a means of fostering genuine political discourse. Future research should continue to explore the complex dynamics between humor, authenticity, and political messaging in the digital age.

4.2 Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the fields of political communication, cultural studies, and semiotics by revealing how political meaning-making occurs through the participatory logic inherent in internet culture. This point is crucial as it emphasizes the need for an evolving understanding of how memes reflect and shape political discourses, particularly in electoral contexts. In extending Shifman's (2014) meme typology, this study introduces a new category called "strategic identity memes." These memes blend cultural symbols with explicit political branding, highlighting their dual function of both entertaining and mobilizing audiences. Evidence from the study illustrates how these strategic identity memes engage users by invoking familiar cultural references, such as traditional symbols or popular icons, which enable political messages to resonate more deeply with intended audiences. For example, memes may incorporate local proverbs or historical figures to elicit a sense of cultural pride while simultaneously promoting specific political agendas. This aligns with the participatory nature of internet culture, whereby users are not just passive consumers but active participants in co-creating political narratives.

The findings underscore that political campaigns must incorporate a nuanced understanding of cultural contexts to optimize their communication strategies, targeting digitally literate voters who respond favorably to content that resonates with their identities. In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of recognizing how memes function as sites of cultural negotiation and political representation in the digital age. Future studies should continue to explore the interplay between cultural symbols and political messaging within the framework of internet meme culture, considering the implications for political engagement and identity formation in varied socio-political contexts.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that memes have evolved from being mere forms of internet humor into strategic tools of political communication in Indonesia's 2024 election campaign. By employing a semiotic analysis, the research revealed that memes functioned as condensed political messages, relying heavily on symbolic representations, intertextual references, and cultural codes to communicate complex ideas quickly and memorably.

Political actors, supporters, and even non-partisan citizens strategically utilized memes to endorse candidates, criticize opponents, and influence public discourse—often bypassing traditional media gatekeepers.

The findings suggest that memes operated on three key levels of communication:

1. Symbolic Framing – where visual and textual elements framed political narratives in a way that resonated with shared cultural values and historical references.
2. Humor as Persuasion – where satire, irony, and parody softened political attacks, making them more acceptable and shareable within online communities.
3. Participatory Amplification – where the public became active producers, remixing and redistributing memes to fit local contexts and subcultural identities.

In practical terms, the study underscores the growing importance for political campaign strategists, public relations professionals, and policymakers to understand and engage with meme culture. Memes are not merely supplemental campaign materials; they are part of an evolving digital rhetoric that shapes political perceptions in real time. Training political communication teams in visual literacy, semiotic awareness, and digital trends will be crucial in future electoral contests.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the literature by situating memes within the broader framework of digital political communication and semiotics in Southeast Asia. It highlights how localized cultural codes intersect with global internet culture to produce hybrid forms of political expression. The findings also point to the potential for memes to reinforce echo chambers and polarization, suggesting that their influence is not universally positive.

Future research could expand on this work by conducting longitudinal studies across multiple election cycles, comparing meme discourse between different political contexts, or employing audience reception analysis to measure how various demographics interpret and respond to political memes. Additionally, examining the ethical implications—such as misinformation, defamation, and the spread of hate speech—will be essential in crafting responsible digital communication strategies.

In conclusion, memes are no longer peripheral to political campaigns; they are central nodes in the networked public sphere. As Indonesian politics continues to be shaped by the digital environment, understanding the semiotic and rhetorical power of memes will be key to both political success and the health of democratic discourse.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

The author solely conceived and designed the study, conducted data collection and analysis, interpreted the findings, and prepared the manuscript in its entirety. All stages of the research process—from conceptualization to final writing—were carried out independently by the author.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request. No publicly archived datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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