

THE INTERSECTIONS OF SEMIOTICS AND (DE)LEGITIMIZATION DISCOURSE IN SOCIAL MEDIA MEMES

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Abstract: Social media memes serve as potent tools of digital cultural expression, especially within political discourse. This study explores how memes utilize semiotic resources and (de)legitimization strategies to shape political narratives. Employing Van Leeuwen's frameworks of semiotics and (de)legitimization (2005, 2007), this research analyzes the visual and textual components of politically themed memes from various social media platforms. The study examines semiotic analysis and (de)legitimization strategies, including authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis. The findings reveal that memes effectively blend semiotic and (de)legitimization techniques to critique or endorse political figures and ideologies. These strategies amplify the memes' influence on public perception and engagement, underscoring their role in shaping political communication in the digital age. This research highlights memes' significance as a medium for political expression, offering valuable insights for political communicators, academics, and digital media strategists. By understanding the semiotic and (de)legitimization strategies employed in memes, stakeholders can better navigate the intersections of media, politics, and cultural representation.

Keywords: Semiotics, (de)legitimization discourse, social media memes, political discourse.

Introduction

The intersection of semiotics and (de)legitimization discourse in social media memes represents a dynamic fusion of cultural, visual, and rhetorical strategies. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their role in meaning-making provides a framework for analyzing how memes combine textual and visual elements to convey complex ideas succinctly (Adegoju, 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2023). Memes, as cultural artifacts, rely on familiar symbols, humor, and irony to evoke responses, making them accessible and engaging tools for communication (Rezeki et al., 2024). Within political discourse, memes transcend entertainment to become vehicles of expression, critiquing or endorsing ideologies, leaders, and policies.

Simultaneously, (de)legitimization discourse examines how authority, morality, rationality, and symbolic narratives are constructed or contested within these texts (Obaid et al., 2023; Ristić, 2015). Memes often deploy strategies such as authorization (appealing to authority figures or institutions), moral evaluation (highlighting ethical dimensions), rationalization (presenting logical arguments), and mythopoesis (invoking cultural myths or symbols) (Ananda & Sari, 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Memes effectively shape public perceptions and influence political narratives by integrating these strategies with semiotic elements like discourse, genre, style, and modality. This intersection highlights memes' dual nature as tools for critique and persuasion in the ever-evolving digital landscape.

This research addresses the need to understand how memes influence political discourse. The growing recognition of memes drives the study as a form of participatory media that enables users to engage with and critique political events. By analyzing the semiotic resources and (de)legitimization strategies employed in political memes, this research aims to uncover the underlying dynamics of their persuasive power. Furthermore, understanding these mechanisms can provide insights into how memes shape public opinion and the broader socio-political landscape.

The digital landscape has transformed how political messages are created, disseminated, and consumed. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms allow for the democratization of content production, enabling individuals to contribute to political discourse through memes. These memes often draw on cultural references, humor, and irony to engage audiences, making them highly effective in capturing attention and eliciting emotional responses (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). However, their simplicity and virality can also spread misinformation, reinforcing biases and deepening divisions. Analyzing political memes through a semiotic and (de)legitimization lens provides a framework for understanding their dual role as tools of influence and distortion.

Research on internet memes has primarily focused on their cultural and social dimensions. For instance, Way (2019) emphasized memes as cultural units that spread through imitation and remixing, highlighting their role in shaping collective identities. Chimuanya & Igwebuike (2021) analyzed memes as a genre, focusing on their text and visual elements. In the political context, Halversen & Weeks (2023) examined how memes function as tools of resistance and advocacy, particularly in the Indonesian political landscape. Studies such as these have laid the groundwork for understanding the cultural significance of memes but often lack a comprehensive analysis of their semiotic and (de)legitimization strategies.

Van Leeuwen's frameworks of semiotics and (de)legitimization (Van Leeuwen, 2005, 2007) provide a robust theoretical foundation for this study. His work on semiotic resources offers insights into how visual and textual elements combine to create meaning, while his (de)legitimization strategies—including authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis—illuminate the rhetorical techniques used to influence audiences. By integrating these frameworks, this research builds on previous studies while addressing the gap in understanding the interplay between semiotics and (de)legitimization in political memes.

While existing studies have explored the cultural and political dimensions of memes, there is a lack of research that combines semiotic analysis with (de)legitimization discourse to examine their persuasive strategies. Most studies focus on memes' visual or textual elements, neglecting their holistic impact as multimodal texts. Additionally, little attention has been paid to the role of memes in specific political contexts, such as elections, protests, or policy debates. This study aims to fill these gaps by comprehensively analyzing politically themed memes from multiple social media platforms, focusing on their semiotic and (de)legitimization strategies.

This research employs Van Leeuwen's frameworks to analyze political memes' visual and textual elements to address these gaps. By examining how memes utilize semiotic resources and (de)legitimization strategies, the study aims to uncover how they critique or endorse political figures and ideologies. This approach enhances our understanding of memes as multimodal texts and provides practical insights into their role in digital political communication.

The research question is: How do the semiotic and (de)legitimization elements in memes influence public perception and engagement? By addressing this question, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on digital media and political discourse, offering a nuanced understanding of the role of memes in shaping public opinion and political narratives.

Literature Review

Semiotics

Van Leeuwen (2005) developed a comprehensive framework for analyzing semiotic resources, emphasizing how meaning is created through discourse, genre, style, and modality. His approach integrates linguistic, visual, and multimodal analysis to uncover how social practices, ideologies, and power dynamics are communicated in texts and visuals.

Discourse is a way of representing social practices. It provides frameworks that shape how meaning is constructed and interpreted. Discourse identifies the cultural, political, or social ideologies embedded in texts and visuals. It reveals what is legitimized or delegitimized. Genre refers to the socially recognized ways of organizing communication. It focuses on patterns and conventions used to convey specific meanings. The genre defines the structure and purpose of a semiotic text, whether it is satire, parody, or critique. Style refers to how semiotic resources (visual, textual, linguistic) are combined creatively to reflect identity, ideology, or mood. Style affects the aesthetic and emotional appeal of a text. It reflects the tone, personality, or political position of the creator. Modality refers to the degree of realism or truth value conveyed by semiotic resources. It determines whether the representation is perceived as factual, exaggerated, or fictional. High or low modality affects the audience's perception of the seriousness, satire, or critique within the text (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

(De)Legitimization Discourse

This discourse involves strategies that justify or contest authority, ideology, or actions (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Authorization relies on the invocation of authority figures, rules, laws, or traditions to justify or delegitimize actions, ideologies, or policies. This strategy appeals to institutional power, social norms, or respected individuals to legitimize or delegitimize a particular stance. Key features are references to authoritative figures or institutions (e.g., political leaders, experts, religious authorities), citing laws, policies, or traditions as a basis for justification and use of imperatives or direct appeals to authority (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Richardson, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Moral evaluation constructs (de)legitimization by appealing to ethical or moral values, often contrasting what is perceived as "right" versus "wrong." This strategy relies on shared societal norms and moral judgments. Key features are the use of evaluative language, the juxtaposition of moral ideals with perceived moral failures, and symbolic imagery to evoke moral or ethical connotations (Chilton, 2004; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2023; Reyes, 2011; Richardson, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Rationalization uses logic, practical reasoning, and cause-and-effect arguments to justify or delegitimize actions, ideologies, or policies. It appeals to common sense, practicality, or efficiency to build legitimacy. Key features are logical arguments connecting actions with outcomes, statistical data, evidence, or causal reasoning to support claims and framing decisions or policies as rational solutions to problems (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2003; Reyes, 2011; Richardson, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Mythopoesis involves creating or invoking symbolic narratives, myths, or stories to establish legitimacy or delegitimize an actor, action, or ideology. It connects the present with historical or cultural symbols to evoke resonance. Key features are allegorical stories or metaphors to frame legitimacy, invoking cultural or historical archetypes (e.g., heroes, villains, leaders) and associating individuals or ideologies with broader, symbolic narratives.

Social Media Memes

Shifman (2013) highlights the participatory nature of memes, where users actively create, remix, and share cultural content. Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook amplify this participatory culture by offering accessible tools for meme creation and instant dissemination to global audiences. Memes often remix cultural materials, such as popular movie scenes, television references, or historical events, to create collective narratives that resonate with diverse groups. For example, political memes frequently adapt familiar cultural symbols to critique governance, policies, or ideologies.

In the political realm, memes have emerged as tools for advocacy and resistance, enabling individuals and groups to voice opinions, challenge authority, and mobilize support. Milner (2013) and Moreno-Almeida (2021) emphasize that memes allow marginalized or dissenting voices to participate in public discourse. For instance, memes are often used during elections or social movements to critique candidates, policies, or social injustices, blending satire with serious commentary to attract attention and provoke thought. Their ability to distil complex ideas into a combination of visuals and short text makes memes particularly effective for political critique and resistance.

Social media memes leverage humour and accessibility to simplify complex political issues, making them understandable to a broader audience. Wiggins & Bowers (2015) argue that humour is an entry point for engaging with otherwise dense or technical topics, while Milner (2018) adds that memes foster emotional engagement through relatability and creativity. Using satire, irony, and parody, memes frame political debates, policies, or scandals in a way that resonates emotionally and cognitively with audiences, encouraging discussion and participation.

Social media platforms are integral to memes' viral nature. The algorithmic structure of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter facilitates the rapid spread of memes, enabling them to reach vast audiences within hours. This virality allows memes to shape public discourse and influence perceptions on political and cultural issues, often sparking widespread discussions or movements.

Political Discourse

Political discourse encompasses a wide array of strategies to influence public opinion and shape political narratives. In traditional media, scholars like Van Dijk (1997) have explored rhetorical strategies used in political speeches, debates, and campaigns to construct power, legitimacy, and identity. Traditional media provided a controlled and centralized platform where political actors could present their narratives, but audience participation was often limited to passive consumption.

The advent of digital platforms like Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram has revolutionized political discourse, enabling the democratization of content creation. Unlike traditional media, where content creation was limited to elites and institutions, digital media has empowered ordinary citizens to contribute to political conversations. Laineste and Fiadotava (2017) highlight how digital platforms allow diverse voices to shape political narratives, often through creative and unconventional formats like memes, videos, or threads.

Mememes have become a central feature of political discourse in the digital age, serving as tools for critique, identity expression, and mobilization. Mortensen & Neumayer (2021) note that memes allow individuals and groups to critique political leaders, ideologies, and policies in often humorous yet impactful ways. For instance, memes parodying political campaigns or controversial decisions often go viral, drawing attention to issues that traditional media might overlook.

Finally, memes play a crucial role in mobilization. Ahmed & Masood (2024) highlight how memes have galvanized support for social and political movements, from grassroots campaigns to global protests. For instance, during the Black Lives Matter movement, memes became a powerful tool to spread awareness, critique systemic racism, and mobilize online and offline activism.

Method

This research adopted qualitative approach, emphasizing an interpretive analysis of social media memes. The method used semiotic and discourse analysis to unpack memes' visual and textual components. Van Leeuwen's frameworks of semiotics and (de)legitimization strategies (Van Leeuwen, 2005, 2007) guide the study, providing a theoretical foundation for examining meaning-making processes and rhetorical strategies. The design was exploratory and descriptive, aiming to uncover patterns in how memes construct and challenge political narratives.

The data consisted of politically themed memes collected from social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook. These platforms were chosen due to their widespread use and significant role in shaping political discourse.

The instrument of this research used content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). The primary instrument is a semiotic analysis framework and (de)legitimization strategies based on Van Leeuwen's models.

Data collection followed these stages: 1) Platform scanning: systematic searches on Facebook and Instagram using hashtags and keywords. 2) Screenshot and archival: capturing memes and metadata such as publication date, source, and engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, and comments). 3) Categorization: grouping memes based on political themes, discourse

Data analysis involved several steps: 1) Semiotic analysis: examining the visual and textual elements of memes, focusing on signifiers, cultural references, and multimodal interplay. 2) (De)Legitimization strategies: identifying rhetorical tools such as authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis.

Result and Discussion

Result

Semiotic and (De)legitimization Discourse Analysis of Memes

Memes employ strategies like authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis, as described by Van Leeuwen (2007). Memes also have semiotic elements such as discourse, genre, style, and modality. Here are examples of the data:

Data 1 Source: Facebook pinterpolitik March 25, 2024



Figure 1. Authorization (De)legitimization Meme

Data 2. Source Instagram @bem.unpad February 13, 2024



Figure 2. Moral Evaluation (De)legitimization Meme

Data 3. Source Instagram @pinterpolitik February 24, 2024



Figure 3. Rationalization (De)legitimization Meme

Data 4 Facebook @pinterpolitik December 10, 2024



Figure 4. Mythopoesis (De)legitimization Meme

Table 1. Semiotics Analysis in Memes

Data of Meme	Semiotics analysis	Explanation
"Mega and the Lost Parpol"	Discourse: Critiques leadership stagnation Genre: Parody	Represents challenges in regenerating political leadership. Humorously adapts the "Dora and the Lost City of Gold" movie poster to create a political narrative

	Style: Adventurous and Humorous	Uses vibrant colors and an adventurous tone to soften the critique.
	Modality: Low realism	Replaces realistic imagery with satirical exaggeration to engage audiences humorously.
"House of Lies"	Discourse: Delegitimizes political governance	Constructs a discourse of moral decay and dishonesty in politics through imagery and text.
	Genre: Satire	Adapts the genre of political satire through dark imagery and humor.
	Style: Dark and Critical	Uses red tones and bold text to highlight seriousness and moral critique.
	Modality: Low realism	Exaggerates visual elements to emphasize the critique while maintaining a clear connection to the original context.
"Agak Laen (Pilpres Edition)"	Discourse: Critiques political drama	Frames political debates as excessive and unproductive through humor and satire.
	Genre: Parody	Adapts a comedic movie poster into a critique of political drama.
	Style: Playful and Satirical	Uses a light-hearted, comedic tone to mock political scenarios.
	Modality: Low realism	Exaggerates visuals by placing political figures' faces onto a fictional movie poster, creating humor while critiquing the drama of political debates.
"The Queen's Gambit"	Discourse: Legitimizes strategic dominance	Frames Megawati as a politically strategic and intelligent figure.
	Genre: Satire with symbolic narrative	Leverages the genre of satire by adapting a cultural icon into a political context.
	Style: Strategic and Symbolic	Integrates elements of chess and strategy to portray Megawati as a powerful and competent leader.
	Modality: Blends realism and exaggeration	Combines realistic imagery of Megawati with symbolic exaggeration (chessboard and queen imagery).

Table 2. (De)legitimization Discourse Analysis in Memes

Data of Meme	Semiotics analysis	Explanation
"Mega and the Lost Ketum Parpol"	Authorization	Uses Megawati as an authoritative figure, symbolized by the central position and the torch she holds, to critique leadership stagnation in Indonesian politics.
"House of Lies"	Moral evaluation	Critiques Jokowi's administration by associating it with deceit and manipulation. Phrases like "House of Lies" and visuals such as blood-stained chairs connote moral failure.

"Agak Laen (Pilpres Edition)"	Rationalization	Highlights ongoing debates in the 2024 election as unproductive distractions. Phrases like “move on” encourage practical solutions and shift the focus toward future political challenges.
"The Queen’s Gambit"	Mythopoesis	Constructs Megawati’s political image as strategic, likening her to a chess master from the Netflix series. The chessboard symbolizes calculated political moves, while the term "Queen" reinforces her dominance.

Discussion

This study explores the intersection of semiotic and (de)legitimization discourse in political memes, emphasizing their role in shaping public perception and engagement. By employing Van Leeuwen's frameworks of semiotics and (de)legitimization strategies, the findings illustrate how memes function as multimodal texts that critique or endorse political figures and ideologies. The following discussion elaborates on the findings, positions them in the context of previous research, highlights the novelty and significance of the study, and discusses its limitations and contributions.

The study identified four primary (de)legitimization strategies in memes—authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis—and their alignment with semiotic components such as discourse, genre, style, and modality:

1. Authorization: Authority figures and symbols were central to establishing credibility. For example, "Mega and the Lost Ketum Parpol" used Megawati Soekarnoputri as a symbolic leader, critiquing the stagnation of political leadership.
2. Moral Evaluation: Memes like "House of Lies" employed evaluative language and visual elements to highlight ethical and moral failings in governance.
3. Rationalization: Logical cause-effect relationships were employed, as in "Agak Laen (Pilpres Edition)," where the critique of electoral drama underscored the futility of extended political debates.
4. Mythopoesis: By linking political figures to symbolic narratives, memes like "The Queen's Gambit" portrayed strategic dominance, drawing parallels with chess mastery.

Semiotic elements further enriched these strategies. For instance, the humor and satire embedded in memes (genre and style) effectively captured attention, while low modality (exaggeration and parody) ensured relatability and emotional engagement.

The findings align with Way (2019) and Chimunya & Igwebuike (2021) who highlighted memes' cultural significance and ability to simplify complex issues through humor and parody. However, this study goes beyond these works by integrating semiotic analysis with (de)legitimization discourse, revealing a more nuanced understanding of memes as rhetorical tools. Halversen & Weeks (2023) emphasized memes' role in advocacy and resistance, particularly in the Indonesian political landscape. This study corroborates Effendi's observations but adds depth by systematically analyzing how memes employ semiotic resources and (de)legitimization strategies to construct political narratives.

Conclusion

The use of technology based on Islamic values can help students select, evaluate and utilize digital resources in accordance with moral and ethical principles. The application of

Islamic principles in the use of technology provides a foundation for responsible use, motivating students to use digital tools as an effective and useful learning tool.

This conclusion emphasizes that the influence of Islam and technology as a "way of life" can help shape student attitudes and behavior in facing the digital era, provide a strong ethical foundation in the use of technology, and have the potential to improve the quality of student learning outcomes.

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