

The Construction Process of Meme Meaning among Islamic Youth in Malaysia

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Abstract

Following the progress of technology that is growing today, it can be suggested that the process of delivering information has rapidly developed. Some messages are creatively produced in various forms including words, pictures, or videos. This situation further creates certain meanings in the recipient's thoughts. Hence, this study attempted to explore the process of constructing the meaning of memes among Muslim youth in Malaysia by referring to 30 memes. A total of 15 memes were obtained from Si Rashid's Facebook account and another 15 memes were obtained from the Gags Malaysia account. The meme sample was chosen as it recorded the highest number of likes in the period from 1 May 2018 to 30 July 2018. The qualitative method was applied by interviewing a total of 29 informants through focus group discussion (FGD). The results of this study found several processes involved in the construction of meaning that has taken place, including checking the validity and credibility of the information obtained. In addition, it was found that recipients will also relate to the memes they watched with their personal experiences, religious teachings, and the culture they practice. In addition, the findings of this study also discovered that the recipient would try to reflect on the memes they watched based on current issues that are happening or have happened.

Keywords: Media Technology, Construction Of Meaning, Memes, Youth, Islam

Introduction

Advances in technology today have accelerated the process of transmitting information from one to another. This information delivery process is not only focused on the sender and receiver but also includes the aspects of channel and medium used to deliver information, for

instance, through the medium known as memes. Several pieces of information can be produced using interesting pictures or images to attract someone's attention. According to Hadzman (2021), some accounts on social media prefer to use images of beautiful women and handsome men for attracting readers' attention. This situation clearly shows that images and pictures can give a certain effect on the audience and readers owing to their ability to convey different meanings and allow each individual to express each image that is viewed based on their understanding of the image. This situation can be referred to as the content of information in the form of memes. According to Bradley and Bret (2014), a meme can refer to a photo that has been edited from someone's original photo, for example, a portrait of Joseph Ducreux, a French painter. He was born in 1735 and is well known for his paintings. In 1793, he managed to complete his own portrait as can be seen in Figure 1. The resulting portrait shows him wearing brown clothes and a black hat. In addition, the portrait also portrays him smiling while pointing towards the position in front of him.



Figure 1: Personal Portrait of Joseph Ducreux

Almost 300 years later, the picture of the portrait has been obtained through the social media Facebook with a change where the original picture of the portrait has been inserted with the use of text as attached in Figure 2 below.

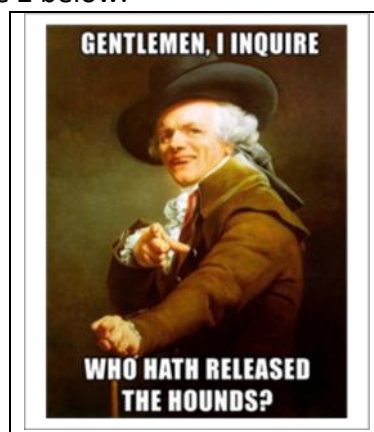


Figure 2: Macro Meme Portrait- Joseph Ducreux

The edited picture has also been accompanied by some lyrics of the popular rap song "Gentlemen, I inquire who hath released the hounds?". This situation clearly shows an addition to the information contained in the macro meme produced. In addition to images in

the form of pictures, the presence of song lyrics included in the meme is seen to convey the message that the meme designer wants to convey. The imitation that occurs in Joseph Ducreux's original picture in Figure 2 can be used as an example of the process of meme formation. Changes to the meme can give a certain meaning to the recipient, which is seen as somewhat subjective and difficult to predict. Even though the picture displayed is the same meme image, the probability of the recipient expressing and interpreting the meme in different ways is very high since anyone can be exposed to various types of information content and various sources of information. Therefore, this paper examined the processes that take place among Muslim youth before they give meaning to the memes obtained.

Media Technology

According to Kumar and Shah (2018), technology has made it much easier for people to communicate and interact with each other where information content can be delivered to millions of recipients at a time. There is no doubt that the advancement of technology today has contributed a lot towards positive effects on the human way of living. However, media technology can sometimes have negative effects on its users. According to Aswati (2007), the development of technology and globalisation that hit this century has indirectly caused the Western-style lifestyle to spread widely. This situation has had a clear impact on the daily life culture of the Malays so much as to be able to currently affect the values and morals among some Malay communities. As a result, more Malays in this country have been reported to be caught up in things that can damage their thinking system and ultimately harm their behaviour and morals. According to Tamuri and Ismail (2009), the explosion and speed of technology that exists today have channelled much negative information through the mass media whether from domestic or foreign sources. According to Che Hasniza et al. (2018), the impact of the use of technology formed today is a string of strong relationships between the use of technology and its users. The existence of the Internet, for instance, is seen to be very influential as anyone can be exposed to certain information. This situation can be linked to the content of information in the form of memes, which are increasingly published to convey a current issue that is happening, whether it is during the election season, disasters or related to artist gossip. As media users, people must always be aware of the effects of this media in their daily lives. This is because some users have been using this medium to deliver fake and disgusting news. According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2020), from January to September 2020, the number of social media abuses was reported as high as 48 charges. This increase in cases shows an increase of 66% compared to that in 2019.

Construction of Meaning

In understanding the construction of the meaning of memes among Muslim youth in Malaysia, an interpretation method was selected for this study focusing on the constructivist method to interpret the data obtained from informants. Charmaz (2006) emphasised that the researcher and the informant involved can shape the meaning of a story together. In addition, the construction process of meaning can also be formed through rapidly developing technology. This situation has to some extent contributed to a more positive direction when information becomes easier to produce along with the ease in delivering information to the target group. Communication technology is seen to continue to grow with the presence of industrial revolution 2.0 by giving birth to various types of facilities, including telephones, cars, and planes (Saucedo-Martinez et al., 2018). The revolution then continued into revolution 3.0 with the presence of electricity and digital technology such as the internet

(Amir et al., 2018). Now, industrial revolution 4.0 has taken over a new phase by combining technological elements whether from a physical, digital, or biological point of view. This situation has created a 'cyber-physical system' to form new capabilities with the help of machines and technologies produced, such as smart robots, and driverless vehicles to allow humans to use their entire brain function (Guangli et al., 2018; Ciolacu et al., 2018; Fuchs, 2018). According to Sousa et al (2018), the existence of revolution 4.0 can make human work and tasks easier with the presence of robots to meet their daily needs and comfort. This situation can be linked to the use of technology in the production of information in the form of memes. In the meantime, the interpretation that takes place is a sharing of reality that arises as a result of the combination of stories between the informants and the researcher. The interpretation method makes it easier for a study to deepen various perceptions, including the construction of the meaning of memes among youth. In the meantime, Wahyuni and Redzuan (2015) conducted a study entitled Health Care Product Advertisements in Malaysia and Indonesia: A Critical Analysis of Media Discourse to observe the sociocultural constructions that exist in the advertising of health products in Malaysia and Indonesia. The study focused on the discourse used in healthcare product advertisements as well as examining the effects of the formation of such advertisements on the cultural identity of the community. The results of the study found that in addition to raising awareness of the importance of healthcare, healthcare product advertisements can also form an eastern culture in advertisements produced by emphasising the principles and elements of the east that contain traditional and Islamic elements. This situation clearly shows that the resulting image in a work, whether it is an advertisement or a meme, can indeed give a certain meaning to its readers.

Meme

According to Dawkin (1976), a meme is a piece of information that is produced through the process of imitation. The imitation eventually forms a new culture that becomes a follow or a trend in a community (Shifman 2014). The seventh edition of the Oxford dictionary (2010) defines a meme as a type of behaviour that has been accepted by a group member. This condition does not occur in genes but exists in other ways such as the process of copying something. According to Shifman (2014), the term meme was introduced by a philosopher known as Dawkins in 1976. He explained the meaning of memes by explaining some transformational cultural units known as genes. According to him, memes can be identified through several distinctive features that are clearly visible, among them include the sharing of character similarities in a certain content whether in physical form or words, which can generate awareness of others, and it is a distribution of imitation and also changes through internet media through various users. According to Milner (2012); Shifman (2014), the understanding is becoming more and more known among internet users. Some users recognise memes as reaction pictures. Reaction Pictures is a collection of pictures that have been modified from ordinary pictures into something more prominent. This situation can be referred to as a meme picture (Shifman, 2014). There is also the presence of micro characters that have been edited using the 'Superimpose' software and inserted elements such as words or text (Knuttila, 2012; Milner, 2013). According to Rahmi (2019), internet memes exist through a combination of pictures, photos, slides and text that aim to give feedback on an issue that is happening.

Youth

According to Youth Policy Formulation Manual, United Nation and other agencies (1999), each country has a different youth age estimate. For instance, youth in Singapore is defined as between the ages of 15 to 29 years old only. On the other hand, in Australia, the definition of youth in that country includes the age of a person in the range of 15 to 25 years old only. This information was obtained from the Age Definition of youth by country in the portal of the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IPPBM). In relation to that, the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act 2007 has defined the estimated age of youth in Malaysia to be between 15 to 40 years old. However, until now, the IPPBM and the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia are still conducting studies and obtaining feedback and views from the community in this country to determine the age of youth. Therefore, based on this data, this study focused on the youth group between the ages of 15 to 40 years only.

Islam

According to Naim (2011), in looking for a point of understanding in Islamic publications, three main foundations need to be relied upon. First is the understanding and concept of Islam itself. Second is the understanding and idea of 'Islamic Communication', whereas the third is the understanding and concept of art from an Islamic perspective. Islam is the language of the Quran that is formed from a basic word consisting of three letters of sin-lam-mim, which refers to the word salam. Salam is one of the names of Allah meaning 'All-Saviour' and 'All-Prosperous'. From these words, emerged Islamic words such as safe, healthy, prosperous, secure, peaceful, surrender, submissive, obedient, and clean from something. According to Rasulullah S.A.W in the hadith of Al-Bukhari, the humans have been commanded to do seven things, which are to visit the sick, deliver the corpse, answer the tahmid of the person who sneezes, help the disabled (weak), help the oppressed, spread greetings and keep one's promise. In terms of language, Islam can be defined as obedient, submissive, submissive and surrender. In addition, Islam means to submit, surrender, and obey Allah S.W.T. Submitting to God is born out of awareness and not based on coercion and others. Submissive with full awareness as a servant of God is a fact in Islam. In addition, Islam is also a 'way of life', which is an integrated and harmonious rule that governs human life based on noble morals as shown by the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. He is the best example where according to Surah Al-Ambia, "We did not send you (Muhammad) except to (be) a blessing to the whole world. This verse clearly explains how holy and pure the Prophet Muhammad's personality is in Islam.

Construction Process of Meme Meaning among Youth

Based on the focus group discussion (FGD) conducted, the results of this study found that the meaning formation process is complex and does not depend on the message conveyed through memes alone. Several things influence the meaning-formation process according to informants, which include the following

Credibility of Information

The first meaning construction process is looking at the credibility of any information or news contained in the memes being read. Credibility refers to the extent to which information or information can be trusted and accepted. Information content that has high credibility will be easier to believe and be accepted among the people who read it. The credibility of information in the media depends on how strong and clear the evidence is from reliable

sources, including authorities such as the police or ministries involved like the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC).

The informants in this study stated that they do not completely believe a meme but instead will check the information and facts that are trying to be conveyed.

"If it's negative, I'll comment there..I comment, I look for information and I share the right one".

(Informant 7/ FGD 2)

According to the informant, if he finds that the content of the meme he reads contains information that smells negative and is unsure of its authenticity, he will try to find other information and references to ensure its truth. The reviewing process is usually done together with friends.

"[...] but if it's an issue that's like..mm...sensitive..like a bit of a slander...I will discuss with friends..discuss with other people..because we want to know the validity of that..the thing..what is the reason behind that?[...]".

(Informant 8/FGD2)

It is clear here that among the sources most trusted by informants are their own friends. Discussions are usually done by sharing memes obtained with friends. If they do not understand the meaning conveyed in the meme, they will discuss and try to relate the meme to the current situation or issue. The discussion is usually done casually. After getting confirmation from a reliable source, the informant will give feedback that he feels is appropriate in the comment section. According to him, action needs to be taken to avoid misunderstandings in the community and being influenced by the content of memes with false information. In addition to determining the validity of the meme, the discussion is also seen to be able to influence the informant's thinking on the issues discussed in a meme. This situation was seen as able to influence the informant's thinking on an issue; for instance, the belief that arises from the content of a meme will open their minds to understand and believe an issue expressed in the meme. If they agree with the content of the meme, they will share the meme with other people, which later encourages them to accept and spread false information. It coincides with the opinion of Alsagoff (2018) who stated that different receptions and interpretations of a matter can contribute to the spread of false information. This situation is indeed very worrying and should be curbed to the root. This is because the act of spreading false information in Islam is an act that is against its teachings.

Personal Experience

The next meaning construction process refers to personal experience. A personal experience is an event that has happened to a person. Whether in a state of happiness or sadness, past experiences can leave a deep impression on an individual. Therefore, it is not surprising that a meme can have such a big impact on someone's life. According to one of the informants in this study, she usually refers to her experience as a mother in the process of building meaning about a meme. For example, she only shares memes related to husband-and-wife stories as her experience as a wife helps her in knowing the appropriateness of a meme to share.

"[...] I will share (meme), Yes. But I'll share it with my audience..for example, if it's a woman and household issue, aaa, for example, there's the issue of 'watch out for your husband if he's naughty with' you know..this kind of issue...I'll share it with the group of mothers who are married..we know and they understand [...]"

(Informant 10/ FGD 2)

According to the informant, her experience as a mother and wife has helped her to deeply understand the content of memes that display issues related to marriage. The situation has influenced her to share the memes with friends among wives or mothers. According to her, personal experience can help a person in the process of constructing the meaning that takes place. Individuals who are wives or mothers will be more affected by memes that contain such information and issues.

Religion

In addition, the meaning construction process can also be linked to religion. Based on the focus group discussion carried out, it was revealed that the informants in this study often refer to religion in the process of constructing meaning. The religion in question is Islam. This is because all the informants in this study were Malay who made Islam their religion.

"Actually, if it is followed from an Islamic perspective, I think it is not good.. because we are taught that if we want to reprimand something, we have to reprimand in aa..not humiliating way [...] I see in this meme issue that when we usually reprimand openly [...] we actually invite others to criticise something"

(Informant 27/ FGD 6)

The informant considers memes as a form of imprudent warning to society. This is because, according to his opinion, the act of reprimanding using memes can encourage bad actions, including the culture of talking about other people's disadvantages.

"I personally think it's negative..because the things in memes are inserted with elements that may not be correct, not true and we as people of the Muslim religion know that, aaa...it can cause slander"

(Informant 6/ FGD 2)

According to the informant, some of the memes contain information that is not true and is deliberately fabricated. He also related the situation to the religion of Islam, which forbids its people from doing things like slander. This situation shows that this informant was aware that some memes can lead to bad behaviour including defamation. The act of swearing or backbiting is also an act that is strictly forbidden in Islamic teachings. Even though the issue is true and authentic, the act can bring a great sin if done with the knowledge or without the knowledge of the individuals involved. Ghibah or backbiting is an act in which an individual speaks badly about another person to expose someone's shame. This act is strongly prohibited in Islam. A person who tattles is likened to eating the flesh of his dead brother (Al-Hujurat: 12).

“But maybe that meme (meme) is right! But even if that person is right, when we convey it, we... ..can be a person who 'slanders'... Yes...'backbiting'. So, that's what Allah the Almighty still doesn't like and curses”.

(Informant 16/ FGD 4)

According to the informant, even if what is conveyed in the meme is something true, the act can cause someone to speak badly about others. According to this informant, a slander is an act that is strongly prohibited in Islamic teachings. This situation suggests that the meaning construction process is also often linked to the religion held, for example, Islam. According to Rossini et al. (2021), some individuals deliberately spread inauthentic content to gain attention. According to a study they conducted, the results of the study found that as many as 42% of the public likes to share unauthentic news about politics on WhatsApp.

Culture

The meaning construction process is also often related to culture. Culture is a behaviour or act that is accepted in society. According to Radcliffe and Surry (1994), culture can be referred to as the acceptance of a person's way of thinking that has similarities with other people's thinking, including the understanding of something. This situation can be referred to as the acceptance on the use of words or terms used in a meme.

“The fans of WeChat used to utilise the wrong English words... such as... "seat couple" turns to "sweet couple", while in the cinema they ask... aa... where is that? They said it is a "sweet couple" place, while it should be... "seat couple"... So they take... arr... they screenshot the conversation, put it in Instagram, then they will make the captions... the caption like... ..it will go viral.. and that thing gets a lot of likes ah... Er... I saw that meme on Twitter... quite a lot of people re-tweeted it... how many... the same picture doesn't have any additions.. but if there are additions, most of them are in... 'quote tweet'... ..it means that they will make another caption, what does it mean... Ar... they will criticise... those who use WeChat... but in most cases it's wrong... What do people say... or can I say typo... it's mostly Malay.”

(Informant 18/ FGD 4)

According to the informant, there are some words or terms that have been adopted in some communities, even though the way the sentence is delivered and used is seen as wrong and different from the actual meaning contained in a word. Although its use is seen as not reflecting the actual message to be conveyed, its acceptance can build a certain meaning in the community. This situation eventually forms a culture, such as the culture of using terms or words that are inaccurate. According to the informant, these actions and behaviours are often associated with the Malay community. This situation indirectly shows that a culture like this is also able to influence the process of constructing the meaning of memes.

Reflections on Current Issues

Furthermore, the process of constructing the meaning of memes can also be linked to current issues that occur in a country. This situation was seen as able to influence the meaning-construction process that occurs among the informants studied. Current issues can be linked to the political situation, economic crisis, social problems, and natural disasters that occur in a country.

“Haa.. 5 cents less the price of petrol.. then below that, he wrote a picture, there is a picture of Najib speaking and then there is.. there is.. that dialogue ahh.. 'Where are the angry people that day, I want to see them' because he has lowered the price of oil by 5 cents”.

(Informant 24/ FGD 5)

According to the informant, the process of meaning construction occurs when he tries to relate the memes he reads to current issues that are happening at that time, for example, related to the price of petrol in the market. Before that, there were a few people who often questioned and blamed the actions of Datuk Seri Najib who at that time was the sixth prime minister of Malaysia and was often seen raising the price of petrol in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the memes read by him have changed the perception of some people towards the former prime minister, when he lowered the price of petrol by 5 cents during that period. According to this informant, some words have been included in the meme that has given the impression that Datuk Seri Najib is looking for individuals who often criticise him for often raising the price of oil. This situation indicates that the current issue is also capable of influencing the process of constructing meaning regarding a person. This situation can indirectly change a person's thinking pattern and response to something, like the view of a politician, or about a current issue that is happening.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings obtained in this paper, it can be concluded that several processes are taken place among meme recipients before they interpret and give meaning to the received memes, among which include identifying the credibility of information, relating an issue to personal experience, relating an issue in memes with the religious beliefs followed and the cultural beliefs that have been practised since generations, as well as the process of construction of meaning, which is the last and foremost, by reflecting on an issue. Based on the main focus of this study, which is to identify the meaning-construction process of memes among Muslim youth in Malaysia, it can be summarised that the meaning-construction process covers the religious aspects and beliefs of its users. If the recipients or viewers of the meme have good religious beliefs, they will try to first reflect on the content of the information in the form of memes that they watched or read to not cause any form of misunderstanding that could eventually lead to disputes among media users. This clearly shows that Muslim youth will refer to Islamic teachings so that they do not make mistakes in channelling information to others.

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