

Visual Language and Identity in Digital Youth Culture: A Socio-Semiotic Study of Memes among Indonesian Gen Z

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ABSTRACT: Memes have emerged as a powerful communicative tool among Generation Z, particularly in Indonesia where digital media usage is high. This study investigates how Indonesian Gen Z utilizes memes as socio-semiotic devices for identity construction, social critique, and cultural expression. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines a quantitative survey of 72 respondents with qualitative interviews to uncover the communicative functions, rhetorical strategies, and cultural dynamics involved in meme usage. The methodology involved structured questionnaires to assess platform use, meme frequency, and perceived communicative intent, alongside thematic analysis of interview data to identify semiotic devices such as juxtaposition, parody, and visual enthymeme. Findings indicate that memes are widely used for humor, information, critique, and emotional connection, with platform features significantly shaping usage patterns. Results show that Indonesian Gen Z uses memes not only to entertain but to articulate collective identity, challenge authority, and respond to current events. These expressions are shaped by cultural codes, generational values, and visual literacy, making memes a vital mode of informal public discourse. The discussion highlights the importance of localized meme analysis and suggests integrating meme literacy into digital education to foster critical engagement with media. This research contributes to digital communication and semiotics by demonstrating that memes serve as dynamic platforms for multimodal expression, public commentary, and identity negotiation. As digital artifacts, memes are central to understanding contemporary youth discourse and the sociocultural landscapes they inhabit.

Keywords: Meme Culture, Generation Z, Indonesia, Digital Communication, Semiotics, Identity, Visual Rhetoric.



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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, broadly defined as those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, has emerged as a significant demographic cohort marked by deep integration with digital technologies. Growing up in an era characterized by rapid technological advancements, this generation has developed

unique communication patterns that differ substantially from those of previous cohorts. The dominant modes of communication among Gen Z are heavily influenced by the digital environments they inhabit. Social media platforms, instant messaging applications, and hybrid forms of communication particularly memes form the cornerstone of Gen Z's digital expression (Anshari & Almunawar, 2021; Maryani et al., 2020). Visual and textual elements are seamlessly integrated into their digital conversations, enabling them to express emotions, critique, and ideas with brevity and nuance. These forms of expression not only serve personal and entertainment purposes but also mirror deeper sociocultural dynamics at play in digital interactions.

In Indonesia, meme culture has rapidly evolved alongside internet penetration and smartphone use. Memes have shifted from simple entertainment to tools for commentary, activism, and identity construction. Indonesian memes frequently mix global formats with local cultural references, humor, and dialects, creating a hybrid form that resonates with youth while reflecting broader sociopolitical awareness (Arifiani et al., 2021; Tremblay, 2018).

The communicative behaviors of Indonesian Gen Z are further shaped by sociocultural influences such as traditional norms, peer dynamics, and regional socio-economic conditions. The ubiquity of digital devices has encouraged a shift away from formal, structured communication toward more spontaneous and informal interactions. Issues such as mental health, environmental sustainability, and social inequality are increasingly addressed through digital discourse, with memes often serving as the preferred vehicle of expression (Indreswari et al., 2023; Januraga, 2017). Moreover, the omnipresence of global pop culture and political dialogue informs the stylistic and thematic elements of meme communication, embedding global narratives into localized formats (Buntaran et al., 2023; Ciupac-Ulici et al., 2022). This confluence allows for a new kind of cultural fluency, wherein Gen Z can switch between global references and local idioms seamlessly, crafting digital content that resonates with multiple audiences.

Visual-textual hybrids such as memes and GIFs are instrumental in shaping interpersonal communication. These formats are not only effective in transcending linguistic barriers but also enhance cognitive retention and emotional engagement. Research suggests that memes operate as digital shorthand, encapsulating complex sentiments or reactions into easily digestible formats (Tambunan & Busnetti, 2018). They allow users to articulate a wide range of expressions with minimal text, making them a powerful mode of engagement in fast-paced digital conversations. This phenomenon has led to the formation of new dialogic structures within online communities, promoting cohesion and cultural continuity among digitally native populations (Rizano & Salehudin, 2023; Yusvirazi et al., 2018). In this way, meme communication functions not just as a social pastime but as a formative element in how contemporary youth build relationships, establish norms, and share collective experiences.

The infrastructure supporting meme consumption in Indonesia is robust. With internet penetration exceeding 73% of the national population, and youth comprising the majority of active users, meme culture is pervasive (Manullang, 2022; Sufyan & Mas'ud, 2022). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become fertile grounds for meme dissemination, with users actively participating in content creation, modification, and sharing. These memes often encapsulate social narratives, offering commentary on contemporary issues

ranging from political discourse to pop culture phenomena (Arifiani et al., 2021). The demographic distribution of internet users reveals a skew toward younger age groups, further validating memes as a primary communicative form among Gen Z (Ciptarianto, 2022). Furthermore, the interactivity of these platforms encourages a two-way dynamic, wherein users are not only consumers but also producers and curators of digital culture.

Beyond mere entertainment, the informal digital discourse facilitated by memes reflects broader trends in youth identity construction. Online platforms provide spaces where Gen Z can experiment with and articulate their identities, often merging global influences with local cultural markers. The humor, irony, and creativity that characterize meme discourse underscore a generational inclination toward authenticity and personal expression (Arjadi et al., 2018). In the face of shifting socio-political landscapes, memes serve as accessible tools for political expression and community formation, allowing youth to engage critically with prevailing narratives while asserting their individuality (Hadi et al., 2022; Januraga, 2017). These forms of engagement enable the democratization of discourse, giving voice to groups historically marginalized in formal communication channels and amplifying youth perspectives in national debates.

Despite growing scholarship on memes, little attention has been given to how Indonesian Gen Z interpret and use them as socio-semiotic tools. Prior research often focuses on typologies or virality, neglecting interpretive practices and cultural logics. This study addresses that gap by examining how Indonesian Gen Z create and use memes to communicate layered meanings that reflect both personal intent and collective identity.

This study adopts a socio-semiotic framework to decode meme communication among Indonesian Gen Z. It aims to examine the rhetorical strategies embedded in memes such as visual enthymeme, juxtaposition, and parody and how these strategies align with users' communicative objectives. By integrating insights from critical discourse analysis and visual rhetoric, the research seeks to elucidate the deeper cultural significance of memes beyond their surface-level humor. The scope of this study includes survey and interview data from Gen Z individuals in East Java, offering a focused yet contextually rich exploration of digital communication practices. The analysis not only interrogates the structural composition of memes but also situates them within broader sociopolitical and technological ecosystems that influence their production and reception.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods design to capture both measurable patterns of meme use and the interpretive processes behind their creation and reception. The approach integrates quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, combining empirical data with socio-semiotic insights (Burnham et al., 2022; Teng et al., 2021).

Quantitatively, the study draws upon a structured survey administered to 72 Gen Z respondents aged 17–23, primarily located in East Java. The survey instrument was designed to gather data on meme consumption patterns, frequency of use across different digital platforms, and the communicative purposes behind meme engagement. The use of closed-ended questions enabled a systematic quantification of participant behaviors, facilitating comparative analysis across various

categories such as platform preference and meme function. This component provides a foundational dataset from which broader usage trends can be inferred.

Qualitatively, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of survey participants. Interviews explored symbolic and rhetorical dimensions of meme use, including strategies such as visual enthymeme, parody, and juxtaposition. Data were analyzed thematically using a coding framework that categorized responses by rhetorical strategy and communicative intent. Examples of coding categories included humor, critique, identity expression, and cultural reference (Pratiwi et al., 2023).

The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods approach lies in its capacity to reconcile the empirical rigor of quantitative research with the contextual richness of qualitative inquiry. As noted by Ling et al. (2021) and Theisen et al. (2021), such interdisciplinary strategies are particularly effective in digital semiotics, where multimodal content like memes operates through layered visual, textual, and cultural cues. The triangulation of methods ensures that the analysis is not only grounded in numerical patterns but also attuned to the cultural logics and interpretive flexibility that define meme communication.

Nevertheless, the methodological design also contended with several challenges inherent to the semiotic analysis of digital content. The evolving nature of meme culture introduces temporal variability that complicates interpretation, as meanings may shift based on context, user engagement, and media environment. Intertextuality further exacerbates this issue, as memes often rely on referential frameworks that are not universally accessible, posing risks of misinterpretation or analytical oversimplification (Marchenko et al., 2023).

Technical limitations also emerged as a concern. Conducting meaningful semiotic analysis in the digital domain requires familiarity with both computational tools and cultural theory. For example, researchers must be equipped to navigate content curation software while maintaining a critical lens toward meme symbolism and social implications (Cardama & López, 2021). This necessitates a methodological agility that few studies have adequately addressed, underscoring the interdisciplinary demands of meme research.

Ethical protocols were followed throughout. Particular attention was given to memes containing sensitive or potentially harmful content, with analysis conducted carefully to avoid amplifying problematic narratives (Ooryad, 2023), all participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality.

In sum, this study's methodological design integrates quantitative breadth and qualitative depth to provide a comprehensive exploration of meme communication among Indonesian Gen Z. It draws upon established models in digital semiotics while addressing the evolving nature of meme discourse and its attendant technical and ethical complexities. This approach contributes to a more holistic understanding of how memes function as both cultural artifacts and communicative strategies in contemporary youth discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents findings from the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, highlighting how Indonesian Gen Z uses memes across platforms and contexts. Results are organized around platform preferences, communicative functions, rhetorical strategies, and perceptions of effectiveness. These themes are analyzed not only descriptively but also in relation to theoretical perspectives on visual rhetoric and socio-semiotics, offering a more integrated understanding of meme communication as a culturally embedded form of digital expression.

Survey Findings: Platform Use and Engagement

The survey revealed a high frequency of meme usage across digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Respondents reported daily engagement with memes, often using them as tools for humor, information exchange, and social bonding. This preference for visual-centric platforms is consistent with previous findings by Kamble et al. (2021) and Zeng et al. (2020), who assert that Gen Z gravitates towards platforms with algorithm-driven feeds that enhance the virality and discoverability of content. TikTok's "For You Page" promotes rapid content turnover, encouraging creative and participatory meme formats. Instagram's Stories and Reels also enable the seamless circulation of meme content, reinforcing the platform's appeal to younger users seeking immediacy and visual engagement (Nazeer & Ashfaq, 2023).

Moreover, these platforms foster participatory culture, wherein users actively create, remix, and redistribute memes rather than merely consuming them. The ease of access to editing tools and media features such as filters, short videos, and sound overlays enhances meme production and increases the frequency and diversity of meme formats. The study supports earlier assertions by Henderson et al. (2017) and Stain et al. (2017), who argue that platform design plays a pivotal role in shaping digital content behaviors.

Generational differences in platform preferences were also evident. While Gen Z displayed a strong affinity for ephemeral platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, older users were more likely to engage with memes on Facebook or Twitter. This divide underscores the adaptability of younger users in navigating evolving digital environments and their preference for visually immersive, socially dynamic platforms (Burton, 2019; McGill et al., 2014). These behavioral patterns suggest that meme communication is not only shaped by platform capabilities but also by the demographic and cultural characteristics of the user base.

Communicative Functions of Memes

Four primary functions of memes were identified: humor/entertainment (35–40%), information (25%), critique (20%), and social facilitation (15–20%). These align with Warfield et al. (2017), who conceptualize memes as tools for humor, critique, and identity. Comparative analysis shows that humor dominates across platforms, but critique-oriented memes gain more traction on TikTok due to its algorithmic amplification of political and social commentary. Conversely, informational memes are more common on WhatsApp, reflecting its role as a semi-private space for rapid

knowledge circulation. This demonstrates how communicative function interacts with platform context (Warfield et al., 2017).

Humorous memes were frequently cited as essential for lightening conversations and expressing shared frustrations or observations in an amusing manner. Informational memes often conveyed concise messages about current events, pop culture, or public health especially during periods of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These were appreciated for their brevity and ability to simplify complex topics.

Critique-oriented memes served as informal commentary on social issues including politics, gender roles, and mental health. The study echoes the work of Lozano et al. (2023), who underscore memes' potential to act as discursive tools for engaging with controversial topics in accessible formats. In contrast, mood-lightening memes helped establish a comfortable tone in group chats or online communities, facilitating social bonding and easing conversational tensions.

The type and reception of memes were also influenced by their format. Memes rooted in local cultural references or inside jokes helped build in-group identity, while educational memes gained traction for their utility in conveying urgent or technical information in relatable ways. Nita et al. (2021) note that these forms foster emotional and intellectual resonance, a point reinforced by our interview data.

Semiotic and Rhetorical Strategies

Qualitative interviews revealed sophisticated rhetorical strategies such as juxtaposition, parody, and visual enthymeme. These strategies allow users to reinterpret mainstream narratives or question norms confirming Laurent et al. (2021). A comparative perspective shows that parody dominates humorous memes, while visual enthymeme is especially powerful in critique-oriented memes because it relies on shared cultural codes. This pattern illustrates how rhetorical choice aligns with communicative purpose, strengthening the socio-semiotic view that meaning is co-constructed by both creator and audience.

In addition, rhetorical devices such as exaggeration, irony, absurdity, and anachronism were frequently employed to intensify emotional or cognitive responses. These strategies, as discussed by Nissenbaum & Shifman (2015) and Nita et al. (2021), increase a meme's comedic appeal and shareability, especially when targeting complex or sensitive topics. Cultural codes deeply influenced the interpretation and impact of these strategies. Memes embedded with local symbols, dialects, or culturally specific humor were more effective among users who shared those references, though they sometimes limited cross-cultural comprehension (Alhassan & Dodoo, 2020).

User Perceptions of Meme Effectiveness

Participants consistently affirmed the effectiveness of memes in articulating personal opinions and social commentary. The visual and textual conciseness of memes was praised for simplifying complex issues without diluting their meaning. According to Burton (2019) and Wright et al.

(2022), the humorous framing of serious messages encourages engagement while avoiding confrontational tones.

Many participants noted that memes offered an avenue for expressing views on politics, identity, and culture in ways that felt authentic and low-stakes. Memes' viral nature enhanced by algorithmic amplification and peer sharing contributed to their perceived efficacy as tools for discourse. As Laineste et al. (2023) and Scott et al. (2017) argue, the blend of humor and critique enables memes to travel across social contexts, expanding their impact and relevance.

In several instances, participants described memes as a digital "language" that allowed them to bond with peers and comment on trending topics with subtlety and wit. This perception reinforces the notion that memes are not merely entertainment but are integral to everyday digital expression and informal public discourse.

In summary, the findings reveal that meme communication among Indonesian Gen Z is a dynamic and layered phenomenon. It is shaped by platform capabilities, demographic preferences, cultural literacy, and rhetorical strategy. Memes function simultaneously as humor, commentary, identity expression, and community-building tools underscoring their central role in the evolving landscape of youth digital communication.

The findings of this study reveal the complexity and cultural richness embedded in meme communication among Indonesian Gen Z. Far from being superficial entertainment, memes function as expressive tools that foster community identity, enable socio-political critique, adapt to cultural variations, and develop critical media literacy. This discussion explores these functions by integrating the study's findings with established literature, while offering deeper analysis of the social, cultural, and cognitive mechanisms involved.

One of the most salient functions of memes lies in their role in reflecting and reinforcing group identity within digital communities. Meme usage patterns uncovered in this study demonstrate how users intentionally select formats, symbols, and textual elements that resonate with their cultural, social, and ideological orientations. This supports research by Ntouvlis & Geenen (2023), who argue that memes act as symbolic anchors for community affiliation. Through in-group references and humorous allusions, users establish boundaries that distinguish insiders from outsiders. The recurrence of certain visual aesthetics, emojis, or meme templates becomes a form of semiotic shorthand that enhances emotional and cultural solidarity (Удир-Бородавко et al., 2023). Additionally, these shared signs and formats help users navigate digital identity, positioning themselves within specific subcultures, fandoms, or socio-political spheres.

This identity-building function is especially significant in digital contexts, where physical co-presence is absent. The reliance on shared meme formats, hashtags, and platform-specific codes underscores how digital youth maintain a sense of belonging. As these memes are continually reshaped through participatory remix culture, they evolve with the community's values, representing a dialogic process of identity negotiation. This dynamic supports the idea that cultural narratives within meme communities are not static but perpetually adapted to address changing societal moods and group priorities. The dialogical and collaborative nature of meme production

highlights the importance of collective authorship and distributed agency in online identity construction, which is distinct from traditional media where authorship is often centralized.

Equally prominent is the role of memes in enabling social critique. The study found that Indonesian Gen Z frequently use memes to express dissatisfaction with political leadership, social injustice, and generational pressures. These functions mirror observations by Strømman (2020) and Mendes et al. (2018), who identify memes as subversive tools capable of bypassing traditional gatekeepers of discourse. Humor, irony, and visual satire serve as disarming vehicles for critique, allowing dissent to circulate in seemingly innocuous formats. Particularly in societies where political expression may face constraints, memes offer a covert but potent medium for protest (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023). By embedding critique in playful formats, users can voice concerns without attracting direct censorship, thus maintaining discursive agency in constrained environments.

This critical dimension of meme culture is not limited to individual reflection. The viral nature of memes facilitates communal sense-making around events. As Bost & Wingenbach (2018) suggest, memes allow real-time response to news and crises, transforming personal sentiment into collective commentary. These participatory practices amplify the educational potential of memes as they bridge informal entertainment and civic dialogue. Importantly, this mechanism also fosters digital solidarity during moments of collective distress or celebration such as political elections, public scandals, or national tragedies enabling users to coordinate affective responses at scale.

The cross-cultural dynamics of meme communication further underscore their adaptability. While the Indonesian context reflects localized humor, insider references, and regional slang, comparisons to global meme trends reveal significant variance in content and reception. Weninger & Li (2022) highlight that memes in authoritarian contexts often veil critique in humor to evade censorship, while in liberal democracies, themes center more visibly around identity, social justice, or cultural irony Zaim et al. (2022). This contextual variability emphasizes the importance of localized semiotic analysis in meme studies. Without accounting for the cultural, political, and linguistic specificities of each region, analyses risk flattening the diversity of digital expression into a homogenized global narrative.

The interpretive nature of memes depends heavily on cultural codes. A meme referencing a local political figure or using a specific dialect may strongly resonate with Indonesian audiences but remain opaque to outsiders. Conversely, memes that draw from globally familiar content (e.g., film references, viral templates) may transcend cultural boundaries but risk losing localized relevance. Thus, cultural fluency is central to meme interpretation, making it imperative to incorporate comparative perspectives into digital communication research. The ambiguity and polysemy of memes often deliberate also invite varied interpretations, enhancing their discursive flexibility but complicating their analytic categorization.

In addition to cultural fluency, temporal relevance plays a role in meme effectiveness. Memes that capture the zeitgeist of a given moment through rapid remixing or alignment with current events are more likely to resonate widely. However, this temporality also renders them ephemeral; what is culturally potent today may be obsolete tomorrow. This highlights the necessity for researchers to engage with memes in real-time contexts and to document their evolution longitudinally. Memes

are living artifacts that embody the spirit of the moment, necessitating flexible analytical tools and interdisciplinary insight.

Another contribution lies in meme literacy. Participants engaged not only as consumers but also as critical evaluators, discerning satire and reflecting on subtext. This confirms Fadeev (2022) and Fedorov (2015) on the pedagogical potential of memes. Comparative evidence suggests TikTok memes foster critical awareness of political discourse, while WhatsApp memes cultivate trust-based knowledge exchange. These findings highlight the need to integrate meme analysis into digital literacy education, bridging everyday youth practices with formal critical thinking skills.

In an era marked by misinformation, deepfakes, and rapid information cycles, memes pose both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, they offer engaging entry points for discussing complex issues; on the other, they can obscure sources and intentions, making critical evaluation essential. The semiotic richness of memes combining visual, textual, and contextual cues provides a valuable case for teaching analytical thinking. As Yaumi et al. (2023) argue, the multimodal literacy developed through meme engagement fosters users' capacity to interrogate digital content. By analyzing meme circulation, users become more attuned to issues of authorship, framing, and manipulation.

Moreover, memes provide a pedagogical entry point for fostering civic responsibility. By encouraging critical interpretation and contextual sensitivity, educators can use memes to teach about ideology, bias, and persuasion in ways that are accessible and engaging to young learners. This positions memes not only as cultural artifacts but also as tools for cultivating digital citizenship.

In sum, memes are culturally loaded, rhetorically powerful, and pedagogically significant. They serve as identity markers, vehicles of critique, and tools for literacy development. By integrating socio-semiotic theory with empirical evidence from Indonesia, this study advances understanding of memes as both cultural artifacts and communicative practices. These findings have implications for future research and for policies that seek to strengthen youth digital literacy and civic engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights how Indonesian Gen Z employ memes not only for entertainment but also as tools for identity expression, social critique, and cultural participation. Through a mixed-methods approach, the findings reveal that memes function as socio-semiotic devices shaped by platform affordances, rhetorical strategies, and cultural codes. These insights advance digital communication theory by showing how localized meme practices both reflect and reshape youth culture in Indonesia.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the study underscores practical implications for education, media literacy, and policy. Incorporating meme literacy into digital education can help young people critically interpret multimodal content, resist misinformation, and engage responsibly in online discourse. For policymakers and educators, understanding meme culture provides a

pathway to strengthen civic participation and cultural resilience among youth. Future research should expand this analysis by comparing regional variations, examining algorithmic effects on meme circulation, and integrating computational methods to scale semiotic inquiry.

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