Covid 19 Memes in Social Media Instagram:
Semiotics-Pragmatics Studies

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ABSTRACT
Since early 2021, Indonesia is one of the affected countries of Covid 19 pandemic. The rapidly and highly spread of this virus forces people to have some changes of way of life. In the middle of March, Indonesian government makes policy of implementing PSBB (large-scale social restriction) instead of district-quarantine due to some considerations. In fact, that policy still has no clear and firm regulation, thus there are still many people interact to each other freely. As a consequence of that phenomenon, the infected patients of Covid 19 are increasingly risen. It obviously makes doctors and medices are overwhelmed and exhausted. To support them and to respond to government policy, some creative people create memes as the reaction to the government in handling Covid 19. Memes of Covid 19 issues in Instagram are used as the data of this research. The objectives are to investigate the sign and meaning through semiotics-pragmatics approach, freedom of expressing, and criticizing. To sum up, this research examines how the symbol, content, and comment as the critics to the government policy. This research can be explained that government policy in handling covid 19 as the symbol. Memes as the reaction of people whether they are pros or cons to the policy. In conclusion, memes can be considered as a tool to express, argue, and criticize the government policy in handling Covid 19. Lastly, the research findings show how the freedom of expressing, commenting, and criticizing government policies as the advancement of cyber digital democracy.

Keywords: Covid 19 memes, Semiotics-Pragmatics, the freedom of expressing, arguing, and criticizing, digital democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

Covid 19 pandemic arises in the middle of March 2020 and still ongoing, it is able to changes people habits. Reacting this phenomenon, government makes several policies, such as implementing PSBB, closing public facilities, keeping distance, washing hands or using hand sanitizer, and wearing mask to stop the spread of virus.

This phenomenon brings people to new normal in terms of habits, mindset, activities and even decision making. Meanwhile, during this situation people still have to perform the normal activities in religion, social, and politic. So that government must prepare attentively all citizens primary needs and secondary needs of feeling safe and getting information easily through the internet by providing internet access fairly from city to town. Besides that, government also has decided some policy to recover the crisis during covid 19 pandemic like publish in (Kompas, 2020b).

The advancement of technology makes internet becoming one of tool to inform and to respond the information whether it is pros or cons. To demonstrate

the response, creators usually create memes equipped by some simple words, proper diction, and humour. In addition, humour can entertain people to be healthier in mentality and emotionally, especially during this pandemic (Abel, 2002; Hussein & Nabil, 2020).

According to Dahlberg (2006) people can state the concepts, ideas, and thought via technology, which is well known as computer mediated communication. Through cyber netizens can openly argue, express, and criticize government policy or other issues. Those supports can be categorized as citizen journalism whose people act as informants, spreaders, and respondents (Fatah & Fatanti, 2019).

Fatah and Fatanti (2019) also states that digital democracy evolution has begun since Prita's issue about her complaint to Omni hospital service in 2009. Another case which has big response from netizens is KPK scandal, *Cicak VS Buaya*, in the same year. Not only those two cases, in 2012, 2014, and 2019 the issue of President election also became hot issues in cyber, especially in social media. In responding those issues, netizens wrote some comments to show their concern of

their country in political term (Norris & Curtice, 2008; Bimber, 2001).

Cyber democracy participants increase nowadays, it can be seen where everyone can participate in democracy openly everywhere and anytime through cyber space. Netizens sometimes, not only participating passively they even criticize the issue. There are many ways of showing the response, such as by stating a serious comment or create a joke and humour. Netizens usually share the comments and picture via social media.

Memes is one of picture creation with notes in it. The picture and notes mostly in a simple diction and sometime silly thing. Memes first published by (Dawkins, 2006) . He stated memes is one of culture demonstration like songs, ideas, costume, hair styles, and so on. Memes are created and shared via internet especially in social media like Instagram, Facebook, twitter, and YouTube. Satyr memes is one of memes that usually created to combine sarcasm and irony by humour. Satyr is usually purposed to expose and criticize some parties (Berger, 1997).

The creation of memes can be easily approved by netizens and become viral when it is created creatively by adding interesting notes and silly picture with humour sense. Satyr memes have already appeared several years ago (Shifman, 2013), He stated that memes now day are increasingly developed rapidly. Moreover, during political issue. Some creators assume that memes can be used to express their ideas and critics to some parties like government which has an unsuitable regulation for the citizens in handling covid 19.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Semiotics-Pragmatics

Several studies related to signs and meanings have been carried out (Saifullah, 2016) through this research the writer used a case study using readers' responses to terrorism issues provided by cyber media on the Internet, it was found that there was a change in structure from "Top Down" to "Bottom Up". Responses to the media while the media "seems to have no space to respond to responses from internet users". The conclusion of this research is that interactive discourse on the internet as a democratic forum.

2.2. Cyber Democracy Participants

There are some studies about the development of cyber democracy participants. Fatah and Fatanti (2019) noted several events that proved the internet as a public space, spreading information, and being able to move the masses, namely the internet as a political communication medium carried out by the Jokowi and Ahok pair during the 2012 DKI Regional Election. Jati (2016) also states that the emergence of cyberspace in

social media is able to transform public space in digital form, this is inseparable from the increasingly widespread development of the internet.

2.3 Memes as a Critics

Recently, there are many research investigating memes, the latest research is containing political issue have been discussed such as (Hatab, 2016); (Yang, G., & Jiang, 2015). The other discussion is to criticize some parties in order to make people be more honest in responding government policy (Sudarsono, 2017). While, according to (Cannizzaro, 2016) the development of memes now days are more widely and clearly spread out through the internet in be cultivate. Other related research proposed by (Zubaidah, 2018). It says that memes are not only to entertain but also to tell a purpose, persuade, sarcastic, and sometimes to conduct black campaign. Besides, memes can also be designed creatively by relating them into social and political aspects, so that it can increase the respond from the readers or netizens (Handayani, Chasana, Mahmudah, Assidik, & Waljinah, 2019; Sudarsono, 2017) almost has the same opinion. While Ross and Rivers (2019) stated that digital memes as a form of media which have big influence of a certain issue. (Purwaningrum, Saifullah, & Sudana, 2020) also pointed that memes can demonstrate the arrangement of delivering ideas, comments, and critical thinking in cyber space. (Hussein & Nabil, 2020)in his concern on caricature and memes, argues that humour caricatures and memes can be considered as a tool to decrease depression and fear due to covid 19 pandemic. Therefore, cyber space makes people more openly express and even criticize the unsuitable policy of the government, in a term of memes of covid 19 pandemic.

There are a lot of issues that can be created as memes related to the recent phenomenon like now where Indonesia facing covid 19 pandemic. In this situation Indonesia is having some changes of way of life so that government must solve this problem by implementing a suitable policy to keep stability in economy, peaceful, and justice. Responding to the policy, some netizens are pros and cons and some others fair-minded. Netizens show their response through social media, they create memes to criticize or only to respond that policy while other netizens are commenting on those memes.

Through this research, researcher purposes to investigate how symbol, content, and comment in covid 19 memes in Instagram become a tool of communication for the citizens to criticize government policy of handling covid 19 phenomena. In addition, the policy is as the symbol, while memes and its comments as the reaction and response from netizens.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

The researcher uses qualitative perspective due to focus of the research. The research examines symbol and content of memes related to covid 19 expression, verbal and non-verbal. Thus the results are in descriptions not numbers. (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2009). This research uses semiotics-pragmatics approach from Peirce in (Hoed, 2014) to examine symbol and content in memes and comments of netizens. Besides, this research also uses Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) approach from (Herring, 2011) to investigate the function of internet in facilitating multimodal discourse like memes in social media, Instagram.

3.2 Data Collecting and Analysis

The data of this research is covid 19 memes collected from social media, Instagram @fakartun. To examine the data, Pierce's theory is applicable. It says in (Hoed, 2014) there are three designs of symbols, they are icon, index, and symbol. (1) icon is a symbol which an object and representment are similar to its reference, such as image, painting, dubbing, and gesture. (2) index is a symbol related to the event and existential (cause and effect); such as, noise of door knocked is a symbol of coming. (3) symbol is a conventional symbol (relation between representment and object). Based on the three designs of symbol from Pierce, symbol is one of the most applicable, since it is relevance to this research in examining picture as nonverbal symbol and language as verbal symbol in social and culture context. Those symbols via memes represent the reaction from netizens to the government policy in handling covid 19.

(Hoed, 2011) States that semiotic of Peirce design is a concept of triadic involving representative, object, and interpretant in semiosis process. The steps of the process are firstly anointing symbol representative through senses. Secondly, relating the representative to experience, object. Thirdly, interpretant, It is the step of object interpretation in accordance with expectation.

Three representative data of memes and comments are taken from social media, Instagram as the research data. The comments column are downloaded by exportcomments.com. The memes chosen reflect reaction from netizens to the government policy in handling covid 19. The data is taken during covid 19 pandemic, since in the middle of March to August 2020.

Through semiotic perspective, memes can be drawn as set of symbols in a particular purpose. It can be interpreted as an explicit message in verbal and nonverbal symbol to insinuate, criticize some parties; in this case, government, and even to only make a joke.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Finding

The following are three memes from the @fakartun account which are used as a representation of the circulating data during covid 19 pandemic around March 15th, 2020 to May 2020. These three memes represent the emergence of several memes indicating the reflection of netizen critics in cyberspace.

4.2 Discussions

Critics in Covid 19 Memes

Critics in social media is a sign of digital democracy are appeared nowadays. It is proofed by how netizens can openly express their ideas by commenting on every single thing that they assume it is fascinating to be responded. Those critics are considered as a discussion space between the netizens as well as netizens in democracy participants. While nowadays, it is very crucial to differentiate whether it is critics, sarcasm, or buzz to the government policy.

In his essay (Kirsch, 2017) stated that .... a critic is just a reader or viewer or listener who make a question explicit and tries to answer it publicly, for the benefit of other potential reader or viewers or listener....He also argues that every people have an equal right to assess other people. People can reserve whether they "like" or "dislike" of someone or something, meanwhile it should be shown in a suitable way to avoid discrimination.

The critics of netizens about government policy in resolving covid 19 are reflected on media social, like Instagram. the critics concern on how government shown an unresponsive on resolving covid 19, so that infected patients of covid 19 continually increases rapidly. Memes which are appeared in social media related to this phenomenon should be communicative, pleasurable, and logical to persuade the readers to figure out the implicit message of covid 19 memes.

Figure 1a #stay at home meme #Medices #covid19

The first meme is uploaded on March 19th, 2020, a few days after Indonesia declared as an affected country

of covid 19 pandemic. In (Kompas, 2020b) announced that Corona virus appears in February 2020 where government implemented PSBB, to close most public places and cut down public transportation operation

In the figure 1a, the creator shows a meme of a medic who is talking on the telephone to the beloved someone; it can be seen from the notes "…. Jangan rindu, Rindu itu berat, Biar aku aja, Dan kamu tetap di rumah ya". which means "….don't miss me, it might be hard, let me handle it. Just stay at home, ok….." those notes and appearance imply the elocutionist is feeling overwhelmed, lonely, and worried.

According to Pierce concept in (Hoed, 2014) they are representamen, object, and interpretant. In figure 1a the medices is acted as representamen. He is wearing APD (Hazardous Material Suit), his face does not clearly appear, while through his eyes it reflects overwhelmed, sadness, fear, and loneliness. Next: Object, expression and notes in that memes show that he feels homesick but he advices his family to stay at home in purpose of decreasing infected patients of covid 19. Most of medices have experienced how they guard this country during covid 19 pandemic. Currently, they are well known as vanguards who serve the patients anytime wholeheartedly. Plus, there is an additional note or caption below the memes. It is written that "ada orang-orang yang terpaksa tidak di rumah untuk anda, bagi kita yang bisa di rumah, dirumahlah" which means "some medices are forced to be out of their house, for you who are able to stay at home, please don't go anywhere". The captioned implies that citizens have to stay at home to decrease the spread of covid 19 and participate in reducing some duties of medices and it will absolutely help them.

The memes above is created by demonstrating a message from medices. It implies that medices have a substantial duty to guard the infected patients of covid 19 to be able to be well recovered. However, when government do not give firmly support by deciding a suitable policy in handling covid 19 pandemics, citizens still can freely interact to each other. Indeed, district quarantine is proposed by governor of Jakarta, Anies Baswedan, it is rejected by government instead of implementing PSBB (CNBCindonesia, 2020). When the infected patients are increasing rapidly, medices will be overwhelmed in medicating the patients. The particular hopes they wish for is that citizens have to stay at their home, except in an urgent situation.

Figure 2a #Corona #Medices

Figure 2a was uploaded on April 14th, 2020. It is about a month after covid 19 pandemic appears. According to Pierce design it can be explained that the representment is a medic with a complete attribute, APD, stethoscope, mask, and medical glasses. While the expression shows eyes closed, smiling, holding hand in his chest as a sign of conviction, and a note "Negara?". Next, Object: the expression of "wondering" related to government policy in handling covid 19 which has found unsuitable way yet. Lastly, interpretant: government implies the unreadiness of handling and resolving covid 19 problem, the additional caption written "Menghadapi Corona tak Sebercanda itu, Negara!". Which means "Corona must be resolved seriously, Indonesia!".

According to memes of figure 2a, it implies that medices feel worried of covid 19 phenomenon while government still has no suitable action to resolve that problem. Government considers covid 19 will be any longer here in Indonesia due to the tropical climate. Meanwhile the infected patients are increasingly risen every day, government still rejected the proposal from the governor of Jakarta, Anies Baswedan, to implement district quarantine (CNBCindonesia, 2020)

A message of memes in figure 2a implies that medices feel worried about the increasingly infected patient of covid 19 and the unreadiness of the government in handling those problem, like no room available and so on. Meanwhile government is still not applying a firmly regulation.
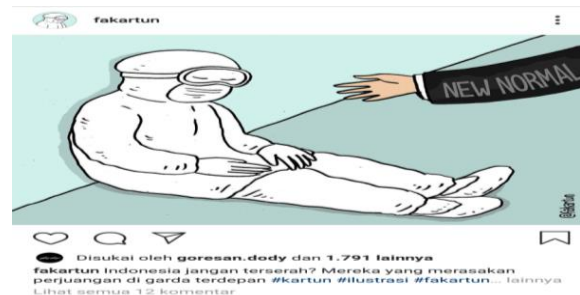

Figure 3a #New normal #medices

Memes of figure 3a was uploaded on May 28th, 2020 two months after covid 19 pandemic. According to (Kompas, 2020a) informed that after two months of

PSBB, government started to permit some public transportation to be operated; like bus, train, and flight.

Generating figure 3a, the representment is a medic who is wearing APD, his gesture shows physically and mentality are tired. It can be seen from closed eyes and lips. Where in front of him there is an arm with writing "New Normal" pretending to help him, meanwhile the medic does not give any reaction. Next, Object: the expression shows "helpless" and "surrender". It implies the medic is wonder why government make a new policy of easing PSBB. Lastly, interpretant: feeling "helpless" and "surrender" implies the critics of the creator about the condition of the government policy which started to open some public transportation like bus, train, and flight. The implication is supported by the caption "Indonesia jangan terserah? Mereka yang merasakan menjadi garda terdepan". Which means "never antiphaty, Indonesia? They sympthatize becoming a vanguard". "They" refers to the medic who wholeheartedly and responsibly serves the infected patients of covid 19.

Memes of figure 3a implies a message of what the medices suggested to government to immediately provide a suitable way of handling covid 19. It is not sufficient if only applying PSBB, it needs more crucial action, so that the infected patients of covid 19 can be decreased and the other infected patients can immediately recover (Kompas, 2020a). If all the suggestions could not be realized, medices will be overwhelmed and fatigue serving those patients. Their only hope is that suggested all the citizens to stay at home except in an urgent condition until government declares a suitable policy.

Netizens Discussion in Comment Column

Along with technological development, memes are easily spread out and contagious through the internet, especially in social media, Instagram. There are many creators show their respect to this phenomenon by creating memes and share them through social media. Unexpectedly, it becomes a chance for the netizens to openly give comment, bring the assumption, and make creation as the respond to those memes. That phenomenon can be considered as public space of democracy. Here are some netizens discussions in comment column which is downloaded by using https://exportcomments.com/

Figure 1b Comment Column/Response of netizens #workfromhome #Corona #Covid 19

Figure 2b Comment Column/Response of netizens #Corona #Medices

Figure 3b Comment Column/Response of netizens #New normal #medices

Comment column is one of the discussion forum among netizens where they can express and argue openly. The analysis of symbol and content in the caption of memes are using semiotics-pragmatics approach.

Memes of figure 1a is uploaded on March 19th 2020 as written in (Kompas, 2020b) where corona virus first appears in February. Government immediately implements PSBB by closing public places and set down public transportation operation. Along with the policy, some medices advice citizens to stay at home directly and indirectly by writing the caption "*Ada orang-orang yang terpaksa tidak di rumah untuk Anda. Bagi kita yang bisa di rumah, di rumahlah*" *#workfromhome #corona #covid_19*

Caption of memes in figure 1a "*Ada orang-orang yang terpaksa tidak di rumah untuk Anda. Bagi kita yang bisa di rumah, di rumahlah*", which means "some medices are forced to be out of their house, for you who are able to stay at home, please don't go anywhere" implied that the creators states that PSBB is considered ineffective due to unclear regulation. The caption of memes in figure 1a represents the feeling of medices who temporarily left their family to serve and takes care the infected patient of covid 19 to decrease it. They also advice all citizens to stay at home. It is shown in memes of figure 1a which captioned *".... Jangan rindu, Rindu itu berat, Biar aku aja, Dan kamu tetap di rumah ya*"

which means "….don't miss me, it might be hard, let me handle it. Just stay at home, ok….."

In figure 2b, the comment of figure 2b implies the government policy of handling increasingly infected patiens of covid 19 has no clearly and firmly regulation. In consequence, medices are exhausted. Finally, they propose the caption *Lindungi "Tenaga Medis . Menghadapi Corona tak Sebercanda itu, Negara!" #corona #tenagamedis*.

Through the caption of meme in figure 2a "*Lindungi Tenaga Medis. Menghadapi Corona tak Sebercanda itu, Negara!*", which means "Corona must be resolved seriously, Indonesia!". The creator implies that government has not found a suitable regulation or way of handling covid 19. While there are medices who are infected and even passed away. The note "*Lindungi Tenaga Medis*". Which means "save medices". Implies that medic must keep healthy due to their demanding duty.

Meanwhile the proposition of "*Menghadapi Corona tak Sebercanda itu, Negara!*", which means "Corona must be resolved seriously, Indonesia!" implies that medic are doubt of government policy in handling covid 19 where there is no clearly and firmly regulation they have made. Government also rejected the proposal from the governor of Jakarta, Anis Baswedan to implement "district quarantine" instead of implementing PSBB; Meanwhile, Jakarta is one of the most infected city (CNBCindonesia, 2020).

Figure 3b is a comment column of memes uploaded on Mei 28th 2020 in term of government policy of reopening PSBB which actually has not ready yet. The medices demonstrate their complaint in a captioned "*Indonesia jangan Terserah? Mereka yang merasakan perjuangan di garda terdepan*" *#Newnormal #tenagamedis*.

Through that caption, the creators tried to explain that medices are wonder of the increasing infected patiens of covid 19. Then, the caption "*Mereka yang merasakan perjuangan di garda terdepan*" implies the medices are vanguards who serves the infected patients of covid 19 wholeheartedly. While in this situation, government persuades people to be ready to face new normal. It is shown in memes of figure 3a which demonstrating a medic who is overwhelmed and exhausted and be "helpless" as a protest to government policy of reopening PSBB where the public place, transportation will be operated and in it absolutely make the case of infected patient be increased.

According to Shifman (2007) an internet-based humor is one of media which is first appeared from some humorous communication. Satyr memes is one of the media of humorous communication which now becomes common used by netizens especially in social media (Shifman, 2013)

says that satyr memes have already been created in Indoneisa for several years ago along with political issue in cyber space. Satyr memes sometimes created to express the ideas or response of some issue, especially political issue. It can be seen from the spread of memes in social media related to the government policy of handling covid 19. Through memes, Netizens are openly pros and cons to that policy.

Nowadays, memes become more and more popular in the internet and be cultivate among netizens. Picture and notes of memes are easily acceptable due to the simple demonstration. Besides, memes are also created with some sense of humor to express creativity of its creator; then, it is shared via social media to communicate or even to express critics to some hot issues. In this case, some social media users can also involve actively in that issue by commenting and discussing with other users about that issue through commented column. The comment can be pros or cons to a government policy.

5. CONCLUSION

As reported by some represented memes of this research, it can be concluded that verbal and non-verbal symbol can be used as communication tool to interpret the purpose of the creator in creating memes. Commonly, the satyr mames during covid 19 pandemic are one of the netizen reactions to the government policy in handling covid 19 which has not been clearly and firmly organized yet. The explanation above is also to answer the research focus of the symbol, content, and comment from the netizen to memes in social media as the critics to the government policy. The policy is served as the symbol while memes and comments are served as the netizens responses.

Covid 19 memes interpret the symbol of cyber critics from the netizens to the government policy in handling covid 19. Some memes represent doctors and medical persons who are overwhelmed and exhausted in assisting covid 19 sufferers which are now increasing risen due to an unclear regulation in facing covid 19. Through these memes also interpret that there are some parties affected covid 19, like doctors, medical persons, citizens, and covid 19 sufferers as far as government implements an appropriate regulation in handling covid 19.

This research implied, now days the advancement of cyber spreads out rapidly. It creates a cyber space for netizens to freely argue, express, and even criticize the government. Above of all, the netizens must surf, compare and confirm the issue to know the accurate information and avoid hoax.

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