



Memes as Discourse: A Multimodal Analysis of Humor and Ideology on Social Media

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Abstract. In the contemporary landscape of digital communication, memes have evolved into a medium of expression that extends beyond mere entertainment, playing a significant role in shaping social discourse, identity, and ideology on social media. This phenomenon has become increasingly relevant amid the intensity of digital interactions, where humor is often employed to implicitly convey criticism, emotions, and social positioning. This study aims to understand how memes are interpreted as multimodal discursive practices that represent humor and ideology within the experiences of social media users. A qualitative approach with an interpretative case study design was employed to explore participants' meanings and experiences in depth. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and document analysis of memes circulating on social media platforms, involving 15–20 active participants aged 18–35 years. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis integrated with a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach. The findings reveal three main patterns: humor as a “safe” expressive strategy for conveying social anxieties, ambivalent experiences characterized by tension between laughter and moral discomfort, and the use of memes as performative tools for constructing digital identity. These findings indicate that memes constitute complex spaces of meaning negotiation, where expression, ideology, and social control interact dynamically. Theoretically, this study enriches the field of Critical Discourse Analysis by incorporating the dimension of users' subjective experiences. Practically, it provides important implications for strengthening critical digital literacy and enhancing the understanding of social communication in the digital media era.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Digital Humor; Ideology; Internet Memes; Multimodal Discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of digital communication, memes have evolved into one of the most dominant forms of expression on social media. For younger generations, particularly Generation Z, memes are no longer merely a form of visual entertainment but have become a medium for articulating social critique, negotiating identity, and fostering group solidarity. In everyday interactions on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter), individuals frequently respond to sensitive issues ranging from politics and gender to global crises through memes that are packaged in humor, irony, and visual symbolism. From the users' perspective, memes serve as a “safe” means of expressing opinions without directly engaging in open debate, while simultaneously functioning as a tool to interpret others' ideological positions within a fluid and rapidly changing digital space.

This phenomenon is evident in preliminary observations of online communities, where memes are employed to respond to current issues such as government policies, global conflicts, or popular cultural trends. Exploratory interviews with social media users indicate that they

often rely on memes as a means of “saying something serious in a less serious way.” However, beneath this seemingly lighthearted nature, memes embody complex layers of meaning, integrating text, images, symbols, and cultural references into a unified multimodal construct. In some cases, humor within memes functions as a mechanism to disguise or “soften” more pointed ideological messages, including hate speech or political propaganda (Sengul et al., 2026). This suggests that memes are not merely products of digital culture but constitute discursive practices with significant social implications.

The urgency of this research is further reinforced in the global context, where social media has become a primary arena for the production and dissemination of public discourse. Studies have demonstrated that memes play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, strengthening group cohesion, and rapidly disseminating ideology (Younis, 2025). Moreover, the advancement of algorithmic technologies and artificial intelligence has accelerated the circulation of memes, positioning them as part of a highly dynamic and difficult-to-regulate discursive ecosystem. In the local context, this phenomenon is equally relevant given the increasing use of memes in political and social discourse in Indonesia, where humor is often utilized to critique authority or negotiate cultural values.

A growing body of research over the past five years has examined memes from various perspectives. Afzaal and Yu (2026) demonstrate how political memes function as arenas of ideological contestation through a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach. Bellés-Calvera and Bellés-Fortuño (2026) reveal that humor in memes can transform hate speech into forms of irony that are more socially acceptable. Meanwhile, Nangle and d’Haenens (2026) highlight how memes operate within an affective-discursive ecology that mobilizes emotions and collective identities. Other studies emphasize the importance of multimodality in understanding memes, where meaning is constructed through the interaction of textual, visual, and social contexts (Sha & Brookes, 2026; Lande et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, a significant gap remains in the existing literature. Most studies tend to focus on textual structures or the macro-level ideological functions of memes, without deeply exploring users’ subjective experiences in producing, interpreting, and responding to memes in everyday life. The dimensions of experience, personal meaning, and the social processes underlying the use of memes as discursive practices remain relatively underexplored. Furthermore, the relationship between humor and ideology in memes is often treated separately, despite their interdependence in shaping complex and ambivalent discourses.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze memes as multimodal discursive practices that represent humor and ideology on social media, employing a qualitative approach that focuses on meaning, experience, and social processes. This study is limited to memes circulating on specific social media platforms, with an emphasis on the interaction between visual, textual, and social elements in constructing discursive meaning. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the fields of multimodal discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis by incorporating the perspective of user experience. Practically, the findings are anticipated to provide deeper insights into how memes contribute to shaping public opinion, social identity, and the dynamics of digital communication in the contemporary era.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

The phenomenon of memes as a form of digital communication creates a space in which meaning, emotion, and ideology are intricately intertwined within multimodal forms. To understand this complexity, the present study draws upon several theoretical frameworks that not only explain textual structures but also account for social experiences and meaning-making processes as lived by participants.

As the primary foundation, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes memes as social practices that reproduce and negotiate ideology in everyday life. Within the context of social media, discourse is not only conveyed explicitly but is often masked through humor and visual symbolism. Afzaal and Yu (2026) demonstrate that memes function as a medium that constructs political and social realities through representations that appear simple yet are ideologically loaded. Similarly, Adeoye (2026) argues that discursive practices on social media, including memes, follow particular ideological patterns such as “us versus them,” which often remain unnoticed by users. In participants’ experiences, this is reflected when they share memes perceived as “funny,” while inadvertently reproducing stereotypes or specific ideological positions. Thus, CDA enables the interpretation of memes as forms of power embedded within everyday digital practices.

The second approach, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), emphasizes that meaning in memes does not reside solely in text but emerges from the interaction among images, language, symbols, and context. Noor (2024) shows that humor in memes arises from the relationship between modes rather than from a single element. Bellés-Calvera and Bellés-Fortuño (2026) further highlight that visual elements often serve as the primary vehicle for conveying ideology, sometimes even more powerfully than text. In participants’ experiences, this is evident when they state that “a meme is funny because of the image,” even though its

ideological message remains implicit. This approach reveals that meaning is often embedded in visuals that appear neutral on the surface.

Humor in memes cannot be separated from social dynamics. Frisli (2026) suggests that digital humor functions both as a tool of critique and as a mechanism for the normalization of ideology. Sengul et al. (2026) further demonstrate how visual humor can “soften” extreme messages, making them more socially acceptable. These findings resonate with participants’ experiences, who report feeling “safe” using humor to express criticism, while also experiencing discomfort when such humor touches on sensitive issues. In this sense, humor functions simultaneously as a tool of resistance, and a mechanism for ideological reproduction. This paradox positions humor as a site of social ambivalence.

From the perspective of identity, memes serve as tools for constructing and displaying individuals’ social positions. Amalia and Budiwati (2026) argue that digital language practices, including memes, play a significant role in shaping the collective identity of younger generations. Participants in this study frequently use memes to signal their affiliations, values, or stances on particular issues. However, such identities are not always stable, as there is often a tendency to exercise restraint due to concerns about social judgment. This indicates that memes are not merely tools of expression but also subtle mechanisms of social control, wherein identity is negotiated within the boundaries of digital norms.

The final approach situates memes within a broader digital ecosystem. Udoumoh and Okpala (2026) argue that digital discourse is inherently dynamic, shaped by user interactions and platform logics. Rezeki et al. (2026) further emphasize that memes can shape social framing by simplifying complex issues. In this context, participants’ experiences cannot be separated from platform algorithms, viral culture, and the dynamics of online communities.

Memes thus become part of an evolving discursive ecology in which meaning is never entirely stable.

Comparison of Theoretical Approaches

These approaches offer complementary perspectives. CDA is particularly effective in uncovering ideology and power relations, yet it is less sensitive to visual dimensions. Multimodal analysis excels in interpreting visual meaning but does not always critically address power relations. Humor theory explains emotional dynamics and ambivalence but lacks a deeper engagement with ideological structures.

Based on these considerations, this study adopts CDA as the primary analytical lens, integrated with multimodal analysis and humor theory. This combination enables an analytical framework that is critically attuned to ideology, sensitive to visual meaning, and reflective of users lived experiences.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretative case study design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of how memes function as multimodal discursive practices in representing humor and ideology on social media. The case study approach is selected as it enables the contextual and holistic exploration of phenomena within specific digital environments, while also providing space to interpret meanings generated through the interaction of textual, visual, and user experience elements (Page, 2022). Furthermore, this approach aligns with the characteristics of memes as dynamic, contextual cultural objects rich in symbolic meaning.

Participants in this study are selected using purposive sampling, based on their active involvement in the production and consumption of memes on social media. The inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) active users of social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, or X) with daily usage frequency; (2) individuals who have created, shared, or interacted with memes; and (3) individuals aged between 18 and 35 years, representing the dominant user group. The number of participants ranges from 15 to 20, with the possibility of expansion through snowball sampling to reach a broader user network. This approach enables the researcher to access digital communities that share similar discursive practices.

The study is conducted within the context of digital spaces (online field), focusing on social media platforms that serve as the primary loci of meme production and distribution. In addition, the social context is extended through direct interaction with participants, both online and offline, to better understand their experiences in using memes as a communication tool. This setting is chosen as social media has become a central arena for the formation of public discourse and multimodal practices (Moussa et al., 2020).

Data collection is carried out through three main methods. First, in-depth interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of memes, particularly in relation to humor and ideology. Second, digital observation (online observation) is undertaken by examining user interactions with memes on social media platforms, including comments, likes, and other forms of engagement. Third, document analysis involves the collection of a corpus of memes (images, texts, and captions)

relevant to the research theme. Data are collected over a specific period (e.g., 2–3 months) to ensure contextual and topical diversity. All interview data are audio-recorded (with participants' consent), transcribed verbatim, and systematically documented.

Data analysis employs a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) approach combined with thematic analysis. The analytical procedures include: (1) open coding to identify units of meaning from interview data and meme corpora; (2) axial coding to organize codes into major themes such as humor, irony, identity, and ideology; (3) multimodal analysis to examine the relationships among visual, textual, and social contextual elements in memes; and (4) critical interpretation to uncover power relations and ideological dimensions embedded within discursive practices. The analysis process is supported by qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo 14 or ATLAS.ti to facilitate data organization, coding, and the visualization of thematic relationships (Sha & Malory, 2026). This approach enables the integration of linguistic, semiotic, and experiential analyses simultaneously.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applies several criteria, including credibility, achieved through data triangulation (interviews, observation, and documents) and member checking with participants; transferability, by providing rich contextual descriptions to allow findings to be understood in other contexts; dependability, through an audit trail documenting the entire research process; and confirmability, by maintaining researcher reflexivity and ensuring that interpretations are grounded in empirical data (Krylova, 2025).

Ethical considerations are also a primary concern in this study. The researcher ensures that all participants provide informed consent prior to their involvement. Participants' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all collected data are used solely for academic purposes. Additionally, in collecting data from social media, the researcher carefully considers the boundaries between public and private spaces and respects users' digital rights.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The data analysis yielded three major themes that represent how participants experience, interpret, and use memes in their digital lives. These themes do not stand independently; rather, they are intertwined, forming a complex landscape of experience shaped by humor, identity, and ideology.

Theme 1: Humor as a “Safe Language” for Expressing Social Anxiety

In many situations, participants described memes as the “safest” way to express their concerns about social or political issues. Humor functions as a protective layer allowing them to speak without being fully exposed. One participant (AR, 23 years old) explained:

“Sometimes I want to criticize the government, but saying it directly feels too heavy... so I just use memes. People laugh, but they actually understand the message.”

This situation often arises when participants encounter sensitive issues such as politics, social inequality, or identity. Memes become a medium that allows them to remain engaged without facing the risk of direct confrontation.

However, beneath this sense of “safety,” ambiguity emerges. Some participants admitted that they are not always certain whether their message is correctly understood.

“Sometimes I make a meme, but I also worry... do people take this as a joke or as something serious?” (DN, 21 years old)

Humor functions not only as a form of expression but also as a space of negotiation between boldness and caution. It opens a space for expression while simultaneously limiting the clarity of meaning.

Theme 2: Laughter and Discomfort: Ambivalence in Meme Consumption

Participants’ experiences indicate that laughing at memes does not necessarily imply full agreement. Many reported experiencing internal tension when encountering memes that are humorous yet morally or ideologically problematic. One participant (SF, 25 years old) stated:

“There are memes that are really funny, but when you think about them, they kind of insult certain groups... so I laugh, but I also feel guilty.”

This phenomenon suggests that humor in memes often operates within a gray area where the boundary between entertainment and symbolic violence becomes blurred. In some cases, participants continue to share such memes despite being aware of their implications.

“I still share them... because they’re funny. But yeah... when I think about it, maybe not everyone is comfortable with it.” (RA, 22 years old)

This ambivalence reflects a condition in which participants are neither entirely passive nor fully critical. They occupy an in-between position: as consumers of humor and as individuals with social awareness.

Theme 3: Memes as Markers of Identity and Social Position

For most participants, memes are not merely content but also tools for expressing who they are. The decision to share or not share certain memes becomes a form of self-representation in digital spaces. One participant (MI, 24 years old) explained:

“When I share certain memes, it’s like showing where I stand... people can tell immediately.”

In this context, memes function as symbols of identity, both explicitly and implicitly. However, this process is not always stable. Some participants reported restraining themselves from sharing certain memes due to concerns about social judgment.

“I often save memes, but I don’t post them... I’m afraid people might think I’m weird or too ‘harsh’.” (LS, 20 years old)

This highlights a tension between self-expression and social control. While memes create opportunities for self-presentation, they also introduce the risk of interpretation and evaluation by others.

Interrelationship Among Themes

These three themes are interconnected within a continuous flow of experience. Humor as a “safe language” (Theme 1) creates space for expression, yet simultaneously generates emotional ambivalence (Theme 2). This ambivalence, in turn, influences how individuals position themselves socially through memes (Theme 3). In other words, participants’ experiences are not linear; rather, they move dynamically between (a) the desire to speak, yet choosing humor as a medium, (b) laughing, yet feeling discomfort, and (c) expressing themselves, while still considering social judgment.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals three main findings: (1) humor in memes functions as a “safe language” for expressing social anxieties, (2) participants’ experiences are marked by ambivalence between entertainment and moral discomfort, and (3) memes operate as performative media in constructing and negotiating digital identity. These findings demonstrate that memes are not merely digital cultural artifacts but constitute discursive practices that exist within tensions among expression, social control, and ideology.

Humor as a Discursive Strategy: Between Expression and Protection

The finding that humor serves as a “safe language” reinforces the argument within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that discourse is never neutral but is always negotiated within relations of power. In this context, humor functions as a discursive strategy that enables individuals to express themselves without directly confronting dominant structures.

Frisli (2026), in *Discourse & Society*, argues that digital humor often operates as a form of “soft resistance” criticism packaged in irony to enhance social acceptability. This aligns with participants’ experiences, who prefer memes as a medium of expression because they are perceived as safer than direct statements. However, this study extends that perspective by demonstrating that such “safety” is inherently ambiguous: humor not only protects but also obscures ideological positioning, rendering meaning open and not fully controllable.

From a multimodal perspective, humor emerges not solely from text but from the interaction between visual elements and social context. Noor (2024) highlights that the humorous effect of memes often depends on shared knowledge, making them both exclusive and susceptible to misinterpretation. Thus, humor in memes is not merely a tool of expression but also a mechanism of social selection differentiating those who “understand” from those who do not.

The Ambivalence of Humor: The Normalization of Ideology Through Discomfort

The second theme reveals a more complex dimension: participants not only enjoy memes but also experience emotional tension when humor intersects with sensitive issues. This finding confirms Schmid’s (2025) study in *New Media & Society*, which suggests that humor in memes can normalize particular ideologies, even when users are aware of their potential implications.

However, this study contributes further by framing ambivalent experience as an active process rather than a passive effect. Participants neither fully accept nor entirely reject the content; instead, they occupy a constantly shifting space of negotiation. Within a CDA framework, this condition can be understood as a form of “ideological struggle” at the micro level, where individuals directly engage with circulating values in digital discourse.

Moreover, this finding enriches existing literature that tends to frame humor in binary terms as either domination or resistance. In practice, participants’ experiences reveal that humor creates a gray area in which critique, entertainment, and ideological reproduction occur simultaneously. This aligns with Adeoye (2026), who emphasizes that digital discourse is fluid and unstable, with meaning always in process.

Memes and Identity: Performative Practices in Digital Spaces

The third finding confirms that memes function as tools for constructing and displaying identity. From the perspective of digital identity theory, the act of sharing memes can be understood as a form of “positioning” a way for individuals to situate themselves within social relations. Amalia and Budiwati (2026) argue that language practices on social media contribute to the formation of collective identity, particularly among younger generations. This study supports that argument while adding an important dimension: identities constructed through

memes are not always stable or authentic but are often negotiated under the shadow of social judgment. In this context, memes become a paradoxical performative space: (a) on one hand, they enable self-expression; (b) on the other, they constrain expression through digital social norms.

This suggests that digital identity is shaped not only by individuals but also by audience expectations and platform logics. Thus, memes can be understood as discursive practices that not only reflect identity but also discipline how individuals present themselves.

Theoretical Contribution: Memes as a Multimodal Space of Negotiation

Taken together, this study both reinforces and extends the framework of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). Previous studies (Afzaal & Yu, 2026; Rezeki et al., 2026) have tended to emphasize textual and ideological analyses of memes, whereas this research demonstrates that meme meaning cannot be separated from users' subjective experiences. The primary contribution of this study is a shift in analytical focus from: "what memes mean" to "how meme meanings are experienced, negotiated, and questioned by users." Accordingly, memes are understood not merely as texts but as spaces of social experience characterized by ambiguity, negotiation, and reflexivity.

Researcher Reflexivity

In the process of interpretation, it is essential to recognize that participants' experiences are inseparable from their socio-cultural contexts particularly as social media users embedded in a fast-paced, ironic, and often ambiguous digital culture. The researcher's position as part of the same ecosystem also influences how the data are interpreted and understood.

This reflexivity is crucial, as it acknowledges that analysis is not entirely objective but emerges from the interaction between participants' experiences and the researcher's perspective. Therefore, interpretations of memes as discourse must remain open to alternative readings and possibilities.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that memes on social media are not merely forms of digital entertainment but constitute multimodal discursive practices rich in the negotiation of meaning, emotion, and ideology. Three major patterns emerge: humor functions as a "safe language" for expressing social anxieties; user experiences are marked by ambivalence between laughter and moral discomfort; and memes serve as performative media for constructing and negotiating digital identity. These findings confirm that engagement with memes is not a passive process but a reflective experience involving social, ethical, and symbolic considerations.

Furthermore, this study offers a novel understanding that humor in memes does not simply simplify reality; rather, it creates a space of ambiguity in which critique, ideological reproduction, and self-expression occur simultaneously. Within this framework, memes can be understood as fluid discursive spaces where the boundaries between seriousness and playfulness, as well as between resistance and normalization, become increasingly blurred. This perspective enriches the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis and multimodal discourse studies by positioning users' subjective experiences as integral to the production of meaning.

Practically, these findings carry several important implications. For policymakers, the results highlight the need for more contextual approaches to understanding digital communication, particularly in responding to forms of humor that may obscure ideology or problematic discourse. For the field of education, especially curriculum development, this study underscores the urgency of critical digital literacy not only the ability to comprehend information but also the capacity to interpret implicit meanings within multimodal texts such as memes. In a broader social context, these findings are relevant for raising public awareness of the psychological and social impacts of digital humor consumption, including the potential for emotional ambivalence and social pressure in the construction of online identity.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. Its focus on a specific age group and relatively homogeneous social context restricts the diversity of perspectives that can be captured. Moreover, the in-depth yet contextual nature of qualitative research means that the findings are not intended for broad generalization. Time constraints also limited the exploration of longitudinal dynamics particularly how meme meanings may evolve across time and changing contexts.

Based on these limitations, future research is encouraged to expand both context and population, including participants from diverse age groups, cultural backgrounds, and digital communities. Alternative methodological approaches, such as long-term digital ethnography or mixed-method designs incorporating quantitative analysis, may provide more comprehensive insights. Additionally, further studies could explore underexamined aspects, such as the role of algorithms in shaping meme exposure or the long-term effects on opinion formation and social relationships.

In conclusion, this study positions memes not as peripheral phenomena but as integral components of contemporary communication practices. Within them, one finds not only humor but also complex reflections of how modern individuals understand, experience, and negotiate their social world in digital spaces.

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