

Multimodal Pragmatics of Internet Memes: The Construction of Meaning Through Text-Image Interaction

Muhammad Natsir¹, Marta Friska Tindaon², Nicolia Putri Edeline³, Vaulline Mikha Sherly Angel⁴, Rojwa Sarwita⁵

¹⁻⁵Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

Penulis Korespondensi:

Nicolia Putri Edeline

enicoliaputri.e@gmail.com

Abstract

Internet memes have evolved into a dominant mode of communication in digital spaces, functioning not merely as visual entertainment but also as a medium for expressing critique, negotiating identity, and fostering social solidarity. Within the context of university students as a digital generation, meme-sharing practices reflect complex pragmatic dynamics arising from the interaction between text and images. This study aims to examine how meaning is constructed and negotiated in internet memes from a multimodal pragmatic perspective, with particular emphasis on users' subjective experiences. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study involved 10–12 university students who were active social media users in an urban higher education setting. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital participatory observation, and meme artifact analysis, and were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal three main patterns: memes function as protective strategies for conveying implicit criticism; multimodal ambiguity creates space for meaning negotiation while simultaneously posing risks of misinterpretation; and text-image interaction generates emotional resonance that strengthens social solidarity and collective identity. These findings enrich multimodal pragmatics by positioning memes as social practices that involve risk calculation, contextual awareness, and affective dynamics within digital spaces. Practically, this study contributes to the development of critical digital literacy and a deeper understanding of youth communication patterns, while opening further avenues for exploring the relationship between multimodality, identity, and power in contemporary digital culture.

Keywords: *multimodal pragmatics, internet memes, text-image interaction, digital implicature, meaning ambiguity, digital solidarity, collective identity, digital literacy*

Introduction

In recent years, internet memes have become a highly dominant mode of expression in digital spaces. For younger generations, memes are not merely a form of visual entertainment, but also serve as a means of conveying social criticism, constructing group identity, and negotiating ideological positions in public discourse. For instance, a university student may express dissatisfaction with government policies through a combination of popular images and short satirical text. In such contexts, meaning is not solely embedded in written language but also in visual imagery, cultural references, and implicatures that are assumed to be mutually understood within online communities.

Preliminary observations of several Indonesian university students' social media accounts indicate that memes are frequently used to address sensitive issues such as politics, gender relations, mental health, and social inequality. Exploratory interviews

with five active Instagram and X (Twitter) users revealed that they prefer meme formats because they are perceived as “safer,” “less confrontational,” and “more immediately comprehensible” than lengthy opinion pieces. These statements suggest the presence of specific pragmatic strategies—particularly the use of implicature, irony, and multimodal ambiguity—that enable users to communicate complex messages concisely yet effectively.

This phenomenon holds significant urgency. Globally, memes have played a role in shaping public opinion during the COVID-19 pandemic (De Saint Laurent & Glăveanu, 2021) and in constructing national identity and public responses to government policies (Way & O'Halloran, 2023). In digital political contexts, memes have even acted as catalysts for ideologically homogeneous networks (Kim et al., 2023). Locally, studies on EFL learners' interpretation of implicatures in memes demonstrate that meme comprehension is strongly influenced by pragmatic competence and cultural background (Nugroho & Liemantara, 2024). Consequently, memes cannot be regarded as simple visual artifacts, but rather as multimodal discursive practices rich in semantic–pragmatic dimensions.

Recent scholarly work over the past five years has shown a growing interest in memes as objects of multimodal analysis. Akinsanya (2024) emphasizes that memes construct meaning through dynamic relationships between text and image within specific social contexts. Elyamany and Hamed (2024) demonstrate how visual metaphor and metonymy in memes function as mechanisms of political delegitimization. Hagedoorn et al. (2024) highlight the phatic visual function of memes in WhatsApp-based communication, while Nann et al. (2024) argue for expanding pragmatic analysis to encompass multimodal forms of online communication such as memes. Meanwhile, research on multimodal hyperbole and metaphor detection (Zheng et al., 2025) shows that text–image interaction poses interpretive challenges even for computational systems.

Despite these contributions, a gap remains in addressing the subjective experiential dimension of meme use—namely, how individuals interpret, negotiate, and reflexively employ memes as pragmatic communication strategies. Most existing studies focus on content analysis or ideological representation patterns, leaving the processes of social interaction and meaning negotiation at the level of lived experience relatively underexplored.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze how meaning is constructed through text–image interaction in internet memes from a multimodal pragmatic perspective, and how users interpret and utilize memes as strategies of social communication. The focus is limited to memes circulating on Instagram and X in the context of contemporary social issues in Indonesia. Theoretically, this study contributes to strengthening the semantic–pragmatic interface within multimodal discourse analysis. Practically, it is expected to enrich critical digital literacy by enhancing understanding of implicature, irony, and meaning construction in online communication cultures.

Theoretical Framework

1. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA):

Intermodal Interaction as Meaning Production Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) conceptualizes meaning as the result of the orchestration of multiple semiotic modes. Way and O'Halloran (2023), in *Multimodality & Society*, demonstrate that COVID-19 political memes construct meaning through simultaneous visual–verbal configurations, in which

layout, facial expressions, and textual elements jointly contribute to the formation of stance.

Hagedoorn, Costa, and Esteve-del-Valle (2024), writing in *Digital Journalism*, emphasize the phatic visual function of memes in maintaining social cohesion through WhatsApp-based circulation. Meanwhile, Liu et al. (2025) propose a semantic text analysis framework integrating spatial metaphors and visual representation, reinforcing the argument that intermodal interaction generates layered and complex meanings. Elyamany and Hamed (2024) show that metaphonymy in political memes operates through visual-verbal relations that activate specific cognitive schemas. Akinsanya (2024) further illustrates how body-related memes and self-image representations construct social meaning through the interaction of visual symbols and satirical captions.

In the context of Indonesian university students, MDA helps explain how participants consciously select popular images (e.g., film stills) to reinforce textual implicatures. However, MDA tends to prioritize semiotic structure and therefore requires supplementation with a pragmatic perspective to account for communicative intent and user experience.

2. Digital Pragmatics and Multimodal Implicature

Recent developments in internet pragmatics have extended the concept of implicature into the multimodal domain. Nugroho and Liemantara (2024) demonstrate that meme interpretation is strongly influenced by pragmatic competence and cultural context. Nann, Udupa, and Wisiolek (2024) argue that memes should be understood as multimodal discursive practices saturated with ideological implicatures. Kim, Collier, and Murray (2023) identify how partisan memes construct homophilous networks through emotional resonance and political implicature. Pavithra and Smith (2025) show that detecting hate speech in text-based images requires an understanding of pragmatic relations between textual and visual elements.

Zheng et al. (2025) develop a model for detecting multimodal hyperbole and metaphor, demonstrating that figurative meaning emerges from dynamic intermodal interaction. This finding resonates with participants' accounts of using visual irony to "criticize without appearing aggressive." Mancera Rueda's (2025) study of verbal humor on Instagram further shows that digital humor relies heavily on collective inference and visual context. Thus, digital pragmatics elucidates the motivations, strategies, and social risks embedded in meme-sharing practices.

3. Sociosemiotics and Digital Intersubjectivity

A sociosemiotic approach positions memes as social practices that shape identity and solidarity. De Saint Laurent and Glăveanu (2021) argue that political memes function as partial narratives that construct collective meaning. Birhane, van Dijk, and Pasquale (2024) examine how memes about technology and AI reproduce particular sociotechnical imaginaries. Bertaglia, Goanta, and Spanakis (2024) analyze influencer self-disclosure as a form of visual pragmatic strategy. Pohlová (2024) highlights the potential for miscommunication in text-image interaction, emphasizing the centrality of social context in interpretation, while Väkevä (2025) discusses the ethical dimension of digital aesthetics in multimodal spaces.

Collectively, these studies suggest that memes are not merely communicative tools but arenas for negotiating meaning, emotion, and power relations. For example, when students share memes about campus policies, they are not simply voicing criticism but also constructing symbolic solidarity through shared cultural references.

Comparative Perspectives and Theoretical Positioning

- MDA emphasizes semiotic structure and intermodal relations.
- Digital Pragmatics foregrounds inference, implicature, and communicative strategy.
- Sociosemiotics focuses on identity, collective emotion, and social context.

This study positions multimodal pragmatics as its primary analytical lens, as it bridges semiotic structure and lived social experience. MDA is employed as a structural analytical tool, while sociosemiotic perspectives provide interpretive context for understanding identity and solidarity dynamics.

Method

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. This approach is selected because the research focuses on users' subjective experiences in interpreting and employing memes as multimodal pragmatic practices. Phenomenology enables exploration of how individuals experience, interpret, and reflect upon text-image interaction in memes as part of everyday digital communication.

Given the nature of the research topic—meaning construction, implicature, irony, and visual representation strategies—an in-depth exploration of consciousness and meaning negotiation is required rather than content analysis alone. Therefore, interpretative phenomenology is particularly suited to capturing lived experience and intersubjectivity in meme-sharing practices.

Participants and Research Context

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their active engagement in creating, sharing, or interpreting memes on social media. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to expand the pool of relevant informants. The study involved 10–12 participants, a number considered adequate for achieving analytical depth in phenomenological research.

Inclusion criteria:

- Active university students aged 18–25
- Active use of Instagram or X for at least two years
- Experience creating or sharing memes related to contemporary social issues
- Willingness to participate in 60–90 minute in-depth interviews

The research was conducted within the social context of Indonesian higher education, focusing on digital communication practices in urban academic communities. This context was selected because students are intensive producers and consumers of memes as part of social and political expression.

Data Collection Techniques

Three primary data collection techniques were employed:

1. In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and online (via Zoom/Google Meet). Interview guides covered motivation for meme use, interpretation of text and images, perceptions of implicature and irony, and ethical considerations. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

2. Digital Participatory Observation

The researcher observed participants' meme postings over approximately two months, focusing on interaction patterns (likes, comments, reposts), discussion context, and audience responses. Digital field notes documented interaction dynamics.

3. Document Analysis (Meme Artifacts)

A corpus of 30–40 memes shared by participants was collected and analyzed to examine text–image relations, visual symbolism, and pragmatic strategies such as implicature, hyperbole, and irony.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke), integrated with a multimodal discourse analysis framework. Analytical stages included data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and interpretative synthesis linking findings to semantic–pragmatic and multimodality theories. NVivo software was used where necessary to facilitate coding and data organization.

Trustworthiness and Research Ethics

To ensure research quality, the following principles of trustworthiness were applied:

- Credibility: methodological triangulation and member checking
- Transferability: rich contextual description
- Dependability: systematic audit trail
- Confirmability: researcher reflexivity through reflective notes

Ethical procedures included written informed consent, confidentiality through pseudonyms, secure data storage, and participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Reflexive thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, digital observations, and meme artifacts yielded three overarching themes that represent participants' experiences in constructing meaning through text–image interaction. These themes are not discrete categories but are interwoven within participants' everyday social media communication practices.

Results

Overview of Themes

Main Theme	Subthemes	Core Meaning
Memes as a Safe Strategy for Expression	(a) Implicit Critique, (b) Humor as Shield	Memes enable criticism without direct confrontation
Meaning Negotiation and the Risk of Misinterpretation	(a) Multimodal Ambiguity, (b) Anxiety over Audience Response	Meaning is unstable and context-dependent
Solidarity, Identity, and Emotional Resonance	(a) Sense of "Shared Understanding," (b) Digital Affiliation	Memes foster emotional closeness and collective identity

Theme 1: Memes as a Safe Strategy for Expression

Situational Background

Several participants described sharing memes during periods of perceived unfair campus policies. Rather than composing lengthy opinions, they opted for film stills

depicting frustration paired with brief satirical text. Digital observation showed that such posts elicited laughter emojis and implicit comments rather than open debate.

Participant Quotations

(RZ, 21 years)

"If I write it directly like a protest, it can be seen as attacking. But if I use a meme, people understand what I mean... and I can still say it's just a joke."

(AL, 22 years)

"A meme is like a shield. We speak, but it doesn't look like we're speaking."

Reflective Meaning

For participants, memes functioned as a buffer zone between self-expression and social risk. Text and image jointly constructed implicatures intelligible primarily to those who shared similar contextual knowledge. Humor operated both as a protective layer and as a vehicle for critique. However, beneath this sense of safety lay persistent ambiguity. Some participants admitted feeling anxious about potential interpretations of their posts as direct attacks. Thus, perceived safety was relative and contingent upon audiences' successful inferencing of intended implicatures.

Theme 2: Meaning Negotiation and the Risk of Misinterpretation

Situational Background

In several instances, participants experienced unexpected responses to shared memes. For example, a meme intended to satirize all sides of a local political issue was interpreted by some viewers as support for a particular group.

Participant Quotations

(DS, 20 years)

"I thought it was clearly satire. But someone commented, 'Why do you support them?' That's when I realized the image I chose could be read differently."

(MN, 23 years)

"Sometimes I intentionally make it ambiguous... but ambiguity is exhausting. You never really know how people will take it."

Reflective Meaning

Text-image interaction does not necessarily produce a single, stable meaning. Indeed, the power of memes often lies in their ambiguity. Yet this ambiguity opens a space for negotiation that can be emotionally taxing. Participants recognized that meaning was never fully under their control; it depended on audiences' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and ideological positions.

Several participants expressed an internal dilemma between the desire to be understood and the strategic need to remain indirect. This paradox reflects the core of multimodal pragmatics: meaning emerges from implicit cooperation but remains vulnerable to interpretive shifts.

Theme 3: Solidarity, Identity, and Emotional Resonance

Situational Background

Digital observation revealed that the most engaging memes were not the most provocative but the most relatable. Memes addressing academic pressure or mental exhaustion triggered responses such as "this is so me" or "we're all the same."

Participant Quotations

(FR, 19 years)

“When friends reply ‘this is so me,’ it feels like someone understands. It’s not just funny—it’s like someone is experiencing the same thing.”

(LK, 22 years)

“Sometimes I post not to criticize, but to find people who think the same way.”

Reflective Meaning

Here, memes functioned as intersubjective media. Text–image interaction did more than convey messages; it created spaces of collective affect. The sense of shared understanding emerged as an emotional experience that reinforced group identity.

However, this solidarity was also exclusive. Participants acknowledged deliberately using specific cultural references so that only “insiders” would fully understand. Thus, memes simultaneously fostered closeness and delineated boundaries—inviting some while implicitly excluding others.

Interconnection Among Themes

The three themes form an experiential trajectory. Memes begin as safe strategies for expression, encounter the risks of interpretive ambiguity, and ultimately operate as spaces for solidarity and identity formation. Participants’ experiences did not follow a linear path; rather, they oscillated between safety and anxiety, clarity and ambiguity, inclusivity and exclusivity. Multimodal pragmatics in meme practices therefore constitutes a complex social experience in which text and images become sites of negotiating meaning, emotion, and power in digital spaces.

Discussion

This study reveals three key findings: (1) memes function as safe strategies for expressing criticism, (2) meme meanings are negotiated within ambiguous spaces that carry risks of misinterpretation, and (3) memes serve as media for constructing solidarity and collective identity. These findings demonstrate that multimodal pragmatics in meme practices extends beyond text–image interaction to encompass social risk calculation, collective affect, and positional negotiation in digital public spheres.

Mememes as Protective Strategies

Participants’ use of memes as communicative shields aligns with pragmatic notions of implicature as a strategic resource. Meaning is not explicitly stated but emerges through cooperative inference between text and image. This finding complements previous studies emphasizing pragmatic competence, while extending them by highlighting the strategic production—not merely interpretation—of implicature.

Ambiguity as Tension

Ambiguity, while offering safety, simultaneously generates interpretive anxiety. Participants’ accounts reveal that ambiguity is not merely a textual feature but a lived emotional experience. Meaning instability creates dilemmas between being understood and remaining indirect, positioning ambiguity as a central site of identity negotiation rather than a neutral communicative trait.

Solidarity and Intersubjectivity

Mememes facilitate emotional resonance and collective identification through shared inferencing and affective alignment. However, solidarity is constructed alongside boundaries, as cultural references selectively include some audiences while excluding others. Multimodal pragmatics thus enables identity formation through implicit emotional alignment rather than explicit declaration.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that internet memes, from a multimodal pragmatic perspective, are not merely humorous visual artifacts but complex social practices. Three primary meaning patterns emerge: memes function as protective strategies for implicit criticism; text–image interaction generates ambiguity that enables meaning negotiation while introducing risks of misinterpretation; and memes serve as media for constructing solidarity and collective identity through intersubjective emotional resonance.

Conceptually, this study extends multimodal pragmatics by framing it not only as an analysis of intermodal relations but as a social practice involving risk calculation, contextual awareness, and affective dynamics. Meaning in memes does not arise linearly from text and image, but from implicit negotiation among creators, audiences, and social contexts. Ambiguity—often regarded as a hallmark of digital communication—emerges here as an existential space in which participants balance the need for expression against the desire for social safety.

Practically, the findings highlight implications for educational policy, critical digital literacy, and student well-being. Memes signal unmet communicative needs, function as collective coping mechanisms, and simultaneously reveal invisible social boundaries. While limited by contextual scope and participant homogeneity, this study opens pathways for future research using longitudinal digital ethnography or mixed qualitative–computational approaches across broader cultural contexts.

Ultimately, internet memes reflect the social practices of the digital generation—spaces where meaning, identity, and solidarity are continuously negotiated through text–image interaction.

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