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A Study of Indonesian Youth's Semantic Perception of English Political Memes on 'What Is Up, Indonesia?' Instagram Account

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ABSTRACT

Political memes have become a popular medium for conveying political messages on social media, particularly among young audiences. However, understanding such content requires the ability to interpret both explicit and implicit meanings. This study aims to examine Indonesian youth's semantic perception of English political memes shared by the Instagram account What Is Up, Indonesia? (WIUI). Using a descriptive quantitative approach, the study involved 50 Indonesian youth aged 18–30 who actively use Instagram and are familiar with WIUI's content. Data were collected through a 22-item questionnaire using a four-point Likert scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that respondents generally demonstrated a fairly good level of semantic perception. The highest understanding was observed in multimodal meaning and irony recognition, while clarity of meaning and evaluative perception showed greater variation. This study highlights the role of multimodal meaning in shaping interpretation and contributes to the limited research on how non-native English-speaking youth interpret political memes in digital contexts. Overall, English political memes can serve as an accessible medium for political communication among Indonesian youth.

1. Introduction

Politics plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, social life, and government policy. In the digital era, the dissemination of political information has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from traditional media, such as newspapers and television, to social media platforms. These platforms offer

content that is more concise, visual, and interactive, allowing political information to reach wider audiences more efficiently. Previous studies indicate that young people are more likely to encounter political information through digital platforms rather than conventional sources, making social media a dominant space for political communication among youth (Loader et al., 2014). However, although access

to political content has increased, this shift raises concerns regarding how effectively young audiences understand and interpret such information, particularly when it is presented in informal, fast-paced, and highly contextualized formats.

Media plays an important role in facilitating the delivery of information and helping audiences understand complex content more effectively (Adisti et al., 2025). One of the most widely used forms of political content on social media is the internet meme. Memes combine images, text, and shared cultural references to communicate messages in humorous, satirical, or critical ways (Shifman, 2014). In political contexts, memes are frequently used to simplify complex issues, comment on public figures, and express ideological perspectives. Their popularity among young audiences lies in their ability to present serious topics in an engaging and relatable manner. However, despite their entertaining appearance, political memes often contain implicit meanings that require interpretation beyond the literal level. These meanings are commonly conveyed through irony, sarcasm, satire, and intertextual references, which may not be immediately understood without sufficient linguistic and contextual knowledge. As a result, audiences are required to actively interpret and construct meaning rather than passively consume information.

Understanding political memes involves semantic perception, which refers to how individuals interpret meaning based on language, context, and communicative intention (Saeed, 2016). In addition, political memes can be considered multimodal texts, as meaning is constructed through the interaction between verbal and visual elements (Dyner, 2016). The integration of text and image adds another layer of complexity, requiring audiences to process multiple modes of communication simultaneously. This complexity becomes even more challenging for non-native English speakers, who must interpret not only linguistic meaning but also cultural nuances embedded in the memes. Therefore, examining semantic perception is essential to understanding how political messages are interpreted in digital environments.

The interpretation of political memes becomes more complex when language and cultural context intersect, particularly for non-native English speakers. Political memes often rely on implicit meaning, intertextual references, and culturally specific humor, which may not be equally accessible to all audiences. As noted by Shifman (2014), memes function not only as units of digital communication but also as carriers of cultural knowledge that require shared understanding among users. This suggests that the ability to interpret memes

is not solely dependent on linguistic competence but also on familiarity with sociopolitical contexts and cultural references. In this regard, semantic perception is closely linked to the audience's interpretive competence, which includes the ability to decode meaning beyond the literal level and to recognize communicative intention. For young audiences, especially those who engage with globalized digital content, interpreting English-language political memes involves navigating both linguistic and cultural dimensions simultaneously. This raises important questions about whether exposure to such content enhances understanding or, conversely, leads to misinterpretation due to limited contextual knowledge.

Previous studies have explored political memes primarily in terms of their role in political communication, ideological framing, and public discourse (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016). In the Indonesian context, research has also examined memes as tools of political communication on social media (Putraa, 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into how memes function as communicative tools, they tend to focus more on the production and impact of memes rather than on how audiences interpret their meanings. The effectiveness of digital media is not only determined by its content but also by how it is perceived by the audience. Previous research suggests that users' perceptions play a crucial role in shaping engagement and understanding of digital media (Usman et al., 2025). This indicates that perception is essential in interpreting digital content, including political memes, which often require users to construct meaning beyond the literal level.

In particular, limited attention has been given to how Indonesian youth interpret English-language political memes, especially in terms of semantic aspects such as meaning clarity, implied meaning, irony and satire, and multimodal meaning. This gap becomes more significant considering that many Indonesian youths are non-native English speakers who must interpret political messages presented in a foreign language. In this context, the Instagram account WIUI has emerged as a prominent platform that delivers political information through English-language memes. WIUI presents political issues using humor, popular culture references, and simplified explanations, making complex topics more accessible to young audiences. However, the use of English and implicit meaning in these memes may also create challenges in interpretation, depending on the audience's linguistic competence and familiarity with political discourse. Therefore, this study aims to examine Indonesian youth's semantic perception of English political

memes shared by WIUI, focusing on five indicators: clarity of meaning, implied meaning, irony and satire, multimodal meaning, and evaluative perception.

2. Methodology

This study applied a descriptive quantitative approach to investigate how Indonesian youth perceive the meaning of English political memes posted by the Instagram account What Is Up, Indonesia? (WIUI). In general, quantitative research focuses on collecting numerical data and analyzing it through statistical methods in order to identify patterns, trends, and relationships within a particular group (Creswell, 2014). This approach was considered suitable because the study aimed to capture respondents' perceptions in a structured way, so that the results could be presented in the form of numbers such as mean scores, frequencies, and percentages.

The research design was descriptive in nature. Rather than testing hypotheses or examining cause-and-effect relationships, this study sought to describe how Indonesian youth interpret the meaning of English political memes. Descriptive research allows researchers to observe and report phenomena as they are, without manipulating any variables (Singh, 2007). In this case, it enabled the researcher to explore different aspects of semantic perception, including literal meaning, implied meaning, irony and satire, evaluative tone, as well as the combination of visual and textual elements in constructing meaning.

Since the object of the study is inherently digital, the research was conducted in an online setting. Data were collected over approximately one month through an online questionnaire distributed using Google Forms. This method was chosen because it is efficient and accessible, especially for participants who are active in digital environments. As highlighted by Evans and Mathur (2018), online surveys offer flexibility for respondents, lower costs, and make it easier to reach participants from different locations. The participants consisted of 50 Indonesian youths aged 18 to 30 years old who actively use Instagram and are familiar with WIUI's content. They were selected because they represent a digitally engaged group that frequently interacts with political content on social media.

This study employed convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling where participants are chosen based on their availability and willingness to participate (Babbie, 2020). Although this technique is often associated with practical considerations, its use in this study is also supported by methodological reasoning. The target population (Indonesian youth)

who engage with WIUI political meme content does not have a clearly defined or accessible sampling frame, making probability sampling difficult to implement in a precise and effective manner. In addition, convenience sampling is widely used in digital communication and social media research, where participant recruitment commonly relies on online access and platform-based engagement (Etikan et al., 2016). Therefore, this technique allows the researcher to reach participants who are contextually relevant, namely individuals who are actively exposed to and familiar with the content being studied.

However, this method also has its limitations. Because the sample is not randomly selected, it may not fully represent the broader population of Indonesian youth. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized in a statistical sense and should be interpreted with caution. Rather than aiming for broad generalization, this study positions its findings as context-specific insights into the semantic perception of a particular group of digitally active individuals. This limitation reflects a methodological trade off between accessibility and representativeness, which is commonly encountered in social media-based research. Acknowledging this limitation is important to maintain transparency and meet academic standards.

The main instrument used in this study was a self-developed structured questionnaire designed to measure respondents' semantic perception of political memes. Questionnaires are widely used in quantitative research because they allow researchers to collect standardized data from many participants efficiently (Sugiyono, 2019). The questionnaire consisted of 22 closed-ended items using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The absence of a neutral option was intended to encourage respondents to take a clear position on each statement and to reduce central tendency bias (Joshi et al., 2015).

The items in the questionnaire were developed based on five key indicators of semantic perception: (1) clarity of meaning, (2) implied meaning, (3) irony, sarcasm, and satire, (4) multimodal meaning, and (5) evaluative or affective response. These indicators were adapted from semantic theory and previous research on digital communication and political memes (Saeed, 2016; Shifman, 2014). The questionnaire was divided into sections covering demographic information, exposure to WIUI content, and the main variable of semantic perception.

Before being distributed, the questionnaire was tested for validity and reliability. Content validity was

assessed through expert judgment, where experts reviewed the items to ensure their relevance. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, which produced a value above 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). This suggests that the instrument was reliable for measuring the intended construct.

Data collection was carried out through a self-administered online questionnaire distributed via social media and other online platforms. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire. This method helped reduce interviewer bias and allowed participants to respond more comfortably and flexibly (Wright, 2005).

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the help of SPSS version 27. The analysis focused on calculating mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations to describe respondents' tendencies in interpreting political memes. These results were then used to identify patterns across the five indicators of semantic perception and to address the research objective.

3. Results and Discussion

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms to Indonesian youth who were familiar with WIUI's political meme content. The questionnaire consisted of 22 items designed to measure five indicators of semantic perception. Table 1 presents examples of the questionnaire items used in this study.

Table 1. Research Questionnaire

No	Questions				
1.	Gender				
2.	Age				
3.	Educational Background				
4.	Current Place of Residence				
No	Statement	SD	D	A	SA
Exposure to WIUI Political Memes					
5.	I am familiar with the Instagram account WIUI.				
6.	I regularly view political memes posted by WIUI.				
7.	I often interact with WIUI's political memes (e.g., liking, sharing, or commenting).				
Clarity of Meaning					
8.	I can clearly understand the main topic discussed				

						in WIUI's political memes.
9.						The main message of WIUI's political memes is often unclear to me.
10.						Some WIUI political memes feel confusing even when the topic is familiar.
Intended or Implied Meaning						
11.						I can understand the implied or hidden meaning behind WIUI's political memes.
12.						I find it hard to understand messages that are not stated directly in WIUI's memes.
13.						WIUI's political memes often communicate criticism indirectly rather than explicitly.
Irony, Sarcasm, and Satire						
14.						I can recognize irony or sarcasm used in WIUI's political memes.
15.						I find it difficult to identify satire in WIUI's political memes.
16.						Humor in WIUI's political memes helps convey political criticism.
Multimodal Meaning						
17.						The images and text in WIUI's political memes work together to convey meaning.
18.						The images in WIUI's political memes sometimes make the message harder to understand.
19.						Visual elements in WIUI's memes help me understand the intended political message.
Evaluative or Affective Perception						
20.						Some WIUI political memes are presented in a harsh or provocative tone.
21.						I feel uncomfortable with the tone used in some WIUI political memes.
22.						I consider the tone used in WIUI's political memes to be acceptable as political criticism.

Clarity of Meaning

The clarity of meaning indicator shows a moderate level of understanding ($M = 7.66$, $SD = 1.83$). This indicates that respondents are generally able to comprehend explicit meanings in political memes, although some variation suggests differences in comprehension levels. This finding implies that while the language used in memes is relatively accessible, individual differences such as prior knowledge and language proficiency still influence understanding (Walgito, 2023). In line with Saeed (2016), semantic understanding at the lexical and sentence level plays an important role in interpreting explicit meaning.

Implied Meaning

The implied meaning indicator demonstrates a relatively high level of interpretation ability ($M = 8.88$, $SD = 1.37$). This suggests that respondents are capable of inferring meanings beyond literal expressions. This ability reflects their familiarity with context-dependent digital communication, where meanings are often indirect. The consistency of responses indicates that this interpretative skill is relatively well-developed among participants. This supports Saeed (2016) and Groenendijk and Stokhof (1991), who emphasize the importance of contextual meaning in interpretation.

Irony, Sarcasm, and Satire

Respondents show a strong ability to recognize irony, sarcasm, and satire ($M = 9.18$, $SD = 1.08$). This suggests that they are proficient in understanding non-literal and evaluative language commonly used in political memes. Their familiarity with meme culture likely contributes to this ability, as such expressions are widely used in online discourse. This finding aligns with Attardo (2000), as well as Camp (2012) and Simpson (2003), who highlight the contrast between literal and intended meaning in these forms. The low variation indicates a relatively uniform understanding among respondents.

Multimodal Meaning

The multimodal meaning indicator obtains the highest mean score ($M = 9.44$, $SD = 1.26$), indicating that respondents are highly capable of interpreting meanings constructed through the combination of text and visuals. This reflects their strong digital literacy and frequent exposure to multimodal content. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), meaning in digital communication emerges from the interaction of multiple semiotic modes. The relatively

consistent responses suggest that this competence is widely shared among respondents.

Evaluative or Affective Perception

The evaluative perception indicator shows a moderate level ($M = 7.66$, $SD = 1.88$) with the highest variation among all indicators. This suggests that respondents' emotional and evaluative responses toward political memes are more diverse and subjective. While they are able to understand the content cognitively, their personal reactions differ depending on individual perspectives and experiences. This finding supports Nabi (2003), who emphasizes the role of emotion in message processing, and Schacter et al. (2011), who highlight the influence of internal and external factors on perception.

To provide an overview of the data, descriptive statistics were calculated for each indicator, including the mean and standard deviation. Table 1 presents the summary of these results.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic of Indonesian Youth's Semantic Perception Indicators

No	Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Clarity of Meaning	50	7.66	1.83
2.	Implied Meaning	50	8.88	1.37
3.	Irony, Sarcasm, Satire	50	9.18	1.08
4	Multimodal Meaning	50	9.44	1.26
.	Evaluative or Affective	50	7.66	1.88

Based on Table 2, the highest mean score was obtained by the multimodal meaning indicator ($M = 9.44$), followed by irony, sarcasm, and satire ($M = 9.18$), as well as intended/implied meaning ($M = 8.88$). These results indicate that most respondents were able to understand meanings presented through visual and textual combinations, figurative expressions, and implied messages in political memes. In contrast, the clarity of meaning and evaluative/affective perception indicators showed the lowest mean scores ($M = 7.66$). The lower result in clarity of meaning indicates that some respondents still faced difficulties in fully understanding the explicit messages contained in political memes. This condition could be related to differences in language comprehension, background knowledge, or respondents' familiarity with political contexts.

Similarly, the lower score in evaluative/affective perception reflects the diversity of respondents' emotional responses and personal judgments toward the memes. Each respondent may have different perspectives, experiences, and emotional reactions when interpreting political content, resulting in more varied responses.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that respondents generally had a good semantic perception of political memes, especially in understanding multimodal and implied meanings. However, evaluative and affective interpretations tended to be more subjective and varied among respondents.

4. Conclusion

This study examined Indonesian youths' semantic perception of English political memes shared by the Instagram account WIUI. The findings reveal a generally adequate level of semantic perception, with notable variation across different indicators. The strongest performance was observed in multimodal meaning and irony recognition, indicating that participants were relatively proficient in interpreting visual-textual relationships and identifying nonliteral meanings. The interpretation of implied meaning was also relatively consistent, suggesting a moderate level of inferential ability. However, clarity of meaning and evaluative perception produced lower scores and greater variability, pointing to difficulties in consistently decoding explicit messages and articulating evaluative or affective responses toward the memes.

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These results suggest that while Indonesian youth demonstrate a functional understanding of English political memes, their comprehension remains uneven across cognitive and affective dimensions. In particular, the findings indicate that interpretive skills related to implicit and multimodal content may be more developed than the ability to critically evaluate or respond to such content. This imbalance raises questions about the depth of engagement with digital political discourse.

The study also highlights the potential of English political memes as a medium for political communication, while underscoring the importance of strengthening semantic and media literacy to support more critical and consistent interpretation. However, the use of convenience sampling and a limited sample size constrains the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider employing more rigorous sampling strategies, larger participant groups, or mixed-method designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

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