

Shifting Meme Content during Information Development on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify and reveal the meaning of memes about COVID-19, and explain changes in meme content in regard to the information development of COVID-19 in Indonesia published by the mass media and online media. The data is sourced from memes that are shared on social media, especially WhatsApp groups in the period of January to June 2020. To reveal the meaning of memes, a semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes' model is used. Qualitative analysis is used to reveal the relationship between memes and the information development of COVID-19 in Indonesia. The results of the study show that meme content has shifted according to three stages of information development of COVID-19 in Indonesia published by the mass media and online media. When COVID-19 was not yet confirmed in Indonesia, meme content contained mostly humor that was not educative, moreover it seemed to underestimate the coronavirus. Meme content which is mostly humorous and pornographic occurred when COVID-19 was confirmed in Indonesia and during the lockdown policy. At last, as the government has begun to distribute social assistance, the meme content looks more critical. The results of this research emphasize the urgency of the mass media as a source of public information during the COVID-19 pandemic, become a reference for the community in making memes as a forum for expressing feelings and social criticism, and serve as a reference for the government to act and make the right decisions related to the pandemic that is endemic in their country.

Keywords: COVID-19, content analysis, Indonesia, information, memes, social media

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. COVID-19 in Publications and Public Talks

The coronavirus (COVID-19), which was initially discovered by sufferers in December 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020), is one of the major pathogens that primarily targets the human respiratory system and continues to mutate or spread around the world. Data released by Worldometers (2020) recorded 33,361,520 cases of coronavirus that has spread in various countries with a total of 1,003,190 deaths. That data also places the USA as the country with the most coronavirus cases, which amounted to 7,322,391 cases. Meanwhile, Indonesia ranks 23rd with 278,722 cases.

The mutation of COVID-19 in several countries caused various reactions in various fields of life. One of them is the pattern of community communication as part of efforts to obtain and disseminate information related to COVID-19. As a new virus, information about COVID-19 is enough to grab the attention of citizens, so it is not surprising that news about COVID-19 in mainstream media and online media get the highest rank in Indonesia. Until August 2020, news about COVID-19 remained the most popular news in the mass media in Indonesia (Rifai, 2020). The high media attention to the COVID-19 issue shows the high public attention to the coronavirus. Through the mass media people listen to and read, they are able to build awareness of healthy living in the midst of a pandemic (Atarodi et al., 2021). This is in line with the assumption of agenda setting theory which states that mass media news is able to direct public awareness to consider important issues that are considered important by the media (Brosius & Weimann, 1996).

COVID-19 is not only reported in mainstream media and online media but also discussed on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp (WA) groups, and other social media. Based on data from Databoks, issues related to COVID-19 were widely discussed on Indonesian social media in the period March 12-23, 2020, in a percentage of 38%. No less than 145 thousand conversations from January-March 2020 were about the coronavirus and 33.7% of the content of those conversations showed positive sentiment (Lidwina, 2020). The high frequency of public conversations about COVID-19 in social media shows that the issue become the public's concern, and they are interested to know about and discuss it. Moreover, information about deaths due to COVID-19 published by the mass media makes individuals feel excessively anxious so that it can cause emotional function disorders such as

neuroticism, depression, and psychosomatic disorders (Ahdiany et al., 2017).

1.2. Concept of Memes

There are various ways that people talk about COVID-19. One of them is through WA (Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021) by discussing COVID-19 with colleagues who join the WA group. Discussions about COVID-19 in WA groups often include memes related to actual problems that occur in society. Brodie (2004) mentions that memes are closely related to the process of replicating various information in the human mind, where its existence is related to various social phenomenon. The memes analyzed in this research represent the thoughts of the Indonesian people when they are dealing with the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and government policies related to it.

Mememes have become synonymous with modern society where they are used as the way to express people's thoughts and attitudes towards the reality of life they are facing or things that they want for their future. This is relevant to the views of Cahya and Triputra (2017), who mention memes as a product of popular culture that thrives in modern society. The accumulation of popular culture built on the meme tradition on social media makes memes become a unit of cultural information that has spread on social networks and has gradually evolved into a social phenomenon (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). In this context, memes do not exist in a social vacuum, but grow and accompany every existing social reality, or what Dawkins (2016) calls a form of cultural transmission in the form of thoughts and ideas that form certain cultural patterns. Therefore, reviewing memes about the COVID-19 pandemic is considered important to get descriptions of people's attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors when they are struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic and several government policies regarding it.

People's thoughts and attitudes related to the COVID-19 pandemic can be revealed from the form of memes they convey. Memes in the form of images that are given text and produce meaning (Nugraha, 2015) became popular because they spread so quickly and were able to inhabit people's minds like a virus (Pusanti & Haryanto, 2015). Memes not only serve as information providers but also serve as a forum for delivering social criticism which is often packaged in the form of humor (Shifman, 2013). Therefore, choosing memes as the focus of this study is considered appropriate to reveal the public's critical attitude towards government policies related to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3. Scope of the Study

The scope of this research study is not only analyzing meme content around COVID-19 from social media (WhatsApp) users but also analyzing the shift in meme content created and shared by social media users in WA groups in three stages of development and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, namely: the stage before COVID-19 was confirmed, during the lockdown period due to the outbreak of COVID-19, and the stage of distributing COVID-19 social assistance. Based on the two scopes of the study, this research is focused on examining two things: first, a study on the meaning of COVID-19 memes using semiotic analysis from Roland Barthes; and second, reviewing with qualitative analysis about the shifting meme content in relation to information on the development and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. The results of these two sets of focus of studies are the goals of this research.

In the context of the use of social media, the scope of this research study is different from some other relevant research, such as research on the use of social media as a means of sharing information or news about COVID-19 (Sulistyaningtyas et al., 2020), or research on the use of social media as a source of COVID-19 information (Allington et al., 2020), or research analyzing hoax news about COVID-19 on social media (Rahayu & Sensusiyati, 2020). In contrast to the studies of these researchers, social media in the scope of this study is positioned as a channel of social control for handling the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia by using memes.

1.4. Need for the Study

Research on COVID-19 memes from social media users is important to do to map trends in meme content that represent the way people express their thoughts and hearts, or what Nasrullah (2014) calls a way to see the social and cultural phenomena of social media users in cyberspace; or what Cinelli et al. (2020) refer to as a way of mapping community social behavior towards the COVID-19 pandemic. Memes which are usually in the form of comments, imitations, and parodies (Bauckhage, 2021) can be used as indicators in tracking public opinion about an issue that is currently being discussed, like COVID-19. Public opinion about something is also related to issues that are currently happening, especially when the issue is being virally reported by the mass media.

This research found some important things, namely a correlation between the COVID-19 memes from social media users and the development of information on CO-

VID-19 cases in Indonesia; it also mapped and interpreted the meme content of Indonesian netizens about COVID-19 as a representation of their thoughts and consciences in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and response of government policies in handling the pandemic, so that practically the results of this research can be used as a reference for the government in responding and formulating appropriate policies in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, and other pandemics in general.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Meming is one of the means used by a person to respond and convey messages about actual phenomena in their environment. Pandemic phenomena such as the COVID-19 coronavirus have been used as meme content by netizens since the virus that originated in Wuhan, China broke out at the end of 2019. Memes about COVID-19 were created with various purposes and types, such as entertaining and funny memes, criticism of policies handling COVID-19 memes, or just informative memes. The diversity of goals and types of memes is reaffirmed by Nowak (2016) by saying that memes are not only entertaining but also respond to reality and provide information to others.

The informative function of memes in giving messages or public campaign tools in the fight against COVID-19 is illustrated by the results of Msugther's (2020) research, which found that Internet memes are a form of freedom of expression in communication that can be used as a tool to convey messages to the public in the context of fighting COVID-19. If Msugther (2020) finds memes as a form of information to the public to be strong in dealing with COVID-19, this research focuses on seeing memes as a response to information development of COVID-19 in Indonesia conveyed by the mass media and online media. Related to this focus, this research reveals the shifting meme content shared by netizens on WA group social media during the information development of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Memes about COVID-19 are often fulfilled with humorous content in the form of images and narration. According to Shifman (2013), jokes are one of the content types that decorate Internet memes. The presence of humorous content in memes on social media in a pandemic situation such as COVID-19 is considered capable of influencing the public's perspective on the coronavirus, because humor conveyed through memes has reduced feelings of tension and fear (Hussein & Aljamili, 2020). Humor content in memes on social media about CO-

COVID-19 sometimes leads to topics that are pornographic. This can be seen in Dynel's research (2021) which analyzed meme images of types of masks, which included memes with images of some objects/properties that women consider sensitive, such as bras and sanitary napkins. In contrast to the pornographic memes featured in Dynel's research, the pornographic content in the memes found in this study was more directed towards husband and wife sex at home during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic that has hit all countries has required each government to formulate appropriate policies in handling it. The phenomenon of government policy in handling COVID-19 has not escaped public discussion and criticism as outlined in memes. Allifian-syah's (2016) study found that memes developed into a new communication style that contained political content and was used as a means to criticize the policies of the state elite. This is evidenced by Nuryana's research (2021) which reveals netizen criticism through memes related to the Indonesian government's lockdown policy. Like the Indonesian people, Indian netizens also use memes as a medium to criticize the lockdown policy announced by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi on March 24, 2020 (Raj & Jayaprakash, 2021). This research not only examines memes related to the government's lockdown policy as carried out by the two studies above but also examines critical memes from netizens related to social assistance and statements by Indonesian government officials and politicians about COVID-19.

This research not only looks at and analyzes memes in general related to COVID-19 but also classifies memes according to the development of information and types of policies issued by the government in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, namely memes that appeared when COVID-19 was not yet confirmed in Indonesia and the government had not issued any policies; memes that circulated during the lockdown policy; and memes that were discussed when the government issued a policy for distributing social assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this research is more directed to study the dominant meme content that appears in the three stages of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying governmental policies. In this context, this research is different from other efforts, such as Norstrom and Sarna's (2021) research, which only looked at COVID-19 memes during the lockdown period in Poland, or Sebba-Elran's (2021) research which studied COVID-19 memes, especially in the early days of implementing the

lockdown policy in Israel.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is a qualitative research with a semiotic approach. Preucel (2010) mentions semiotics as a field of study focused on analyzing sign systems and modes of representation used by humans to convey emotions, ideas, and life experiences. Images are one of the sign systems that are studied within the field of semiotics (Barthes, 1968). In the context of this research, the sign system studied is meme images from Indonesian netizens that describe their emotions, thoughts, and life experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in their country.

3.1. Data Source

The research data comes from memes about COVID-19 sent and commented on by members of two WhatsApp (WA) groups, namely "Pojok NTB" and "S2 Komunikasi 2002." These two WA groups were chosen because they have a high intensity of dialogue about COVID-19 memes. The WA group "Pojok NTB" represents a WA group based in regions with the majority of its members coming from the NTB Province. The WA group "Pojok NTB" was created January 6, 2020 by an admin group named M. Fihiruddin, S.PD. As of August 27, 2021, there were 256 group members. WA Pojok NTB group participants are Indonesian citizens born in the NTB area who live in various regencies and cities in the NTB Province, and several cities in Indonesia such as the City of Jakarta, the City of Bandung, West Java, and the City of Denpasar Bali. They come from various professional backgrounds, such as the Governor of NTB, Regents in the Province of NTB, members of the legislature, politicians, businessmen, lecturers, teachers, activists of non-government organizations (NGOs), journalists, and various other professions.

Meanwhile, the WA group "S2 Komunikasi 2002" represents the WA group at the national level, which is the WA group of alumni of the Master of Communication Science Program, Padjadjaran University, Indonesia with members from various provinces in Indonesia. The WA group "S2 Communication 2002" was created by an admin named Dr. Yenrizal, M.Si on April 3, 2017 with 30 members. The majority of group members are lecturers (22 people), two politicians, two businessmen, two NGO activists, and two government employees. They live and work in several areas in Indonesia, such as Jakarta, Bandung, Palembang, Aceh, Riau, Banjarmasin, Mataram, and Kendari.

Even though the researcher is a member of the two WA groups, the researcher still asked for permission openly via chat in the group to retrieve meme documents shared by group members. The COVID-19 memes from the two WA groups were taken from January to June 2020. This time span represents the different developments of COVID-19 in Indonesia, such as before a COVID-19 case was confirmed in Indonesia, when an Indonesian citizen was first confirmed with COVID-19 (including during the polemic about lockdown policies), and while the government is distributing social assistance to residents impacted by COVID-19.

3.2. Data Collection & Analysis

The initial step in the data collection process was to observe and collect all the COVID-19 memes that appeared in the two WA groups that were the source of the research data. At this stage there are 40 memes collected. To ensure the correctness and the suitability of the collected memes, data validation is carried out by ensuring that those memes are related to COVID-19 and they are the same as the meme images circulating on online media and other social media. All memes which have been validated are classified based on three time spans of meme emergence, namely; first, COVID-19 memes that were shared in the January-February 2020 range (in the period before COVID-19 was confirmed in Indonesia); second, COVID-19 memes that were shared in the March-April 2020 range (during the COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdown policy); and third, COVID-19 memes that were shared in the May-June 2020 range (during the distribution of COVID-19 social assistance). The three classifications of meme data are sorted and marked with different codes so they do not get mixed up. Furthermore, in each classification, memes that often appear and have been discussed for a long time in the two WA groups are identified as sources of research data. With criteria like these, three memes were found in each stage of development and handling of COVID-19 in Indonesia. These nine memes are then used as objects of study in this study.

Data were analyzed qualitatively with two analytical processes. The first analysis used Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis model, which focused on three units of analysis, namely analyzing denotative meaning, connotation, and the myth of each meme studied in this research. The inclusion of connotative and mythical meaning analysis in Barthes' model according to Sobur (2013) is inseparable from Barthes's thinking that language is a sign system that reflects the assumptions of a particular society at a

certain time. The second qualitative analysis was carried out by linking memes with the stages of development and handling of COVID-19 in Indonesia, and also analyzed using relevant concepts and theories. With this kind of analysis, the meaning of COVID-19 memes is found in Indonesia and the trend of shifting meme content is revealed in relation to the three stages of development and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. The results of the research are validated in two ways; *first*, by diligently re-examining all existing data; this way is done by re-checking the suitability of the data based on the code that has been given and ensuring that the nine meme images that have been selected as research samples have been analyzed according to the semiotic analysis model of Barthes. *Second*, by discussing with colleagues, it helps authors to check the suitability of the data presented with the research focus, discuss the results of data analysis, and provide other useful inputs to get more perfect results from this research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research identifies three stages of Indonesian netizens' conversations about COVID-19, namely; (a) the stage before COVID-19 was confirmed in Indonesia; (b) the stage when the coronavirus was confirmed and spread in Indonesia; and (c) the stage of the policy for the distribution of COVID-19 social assistance. In each stage of the conversation, a correlation was found between the development of information on COVID-19 and the meme content written and discussed by Indonesian netizens. The meme trend shared by netizens in the three stages of the conversation is also different. The following describes the types and trends of memes from Indonesian netizens in the three stages of conversation about COVID-19.

4.1. Memes Before COVID-19 Confirmed in Indonesia

The discussion about the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia had begun before it was confirmed that there were Indonesian Citizens (WNI) who were confirmed to have COVID-19. At this time, information about COVID-19 from the mass media was still reporting about cases of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China and in several countries that had started being attacked by COVID-19. Memes that appear at this time show the attitude of the Indonesian people who are not yet worried about the coronavirus and even make the issue of COVID-19 into joke content. This phenomenon was raised by Indonesian netizens through memes (see Fig. 1).

The meme as seen in Fig. 1 was posted by a member of the WA group “Pojok NTB” to insinuate Indonesian public officials and politicians who are not serious or do not show concern about the coronavirus. The meme quoted a statement from a member of the House of Representatives (Ribka Tjiptaning), who called the coronavirus an acronym for “Komunitas Rondo Mempesona,” a joke from the Minister of Transportation who said “We are immune to corona because we like to eat *nasi kucing*” (a small portion of special rice in Yogyakarta). A joke about the coronavirus was also conveyed by the head of the Investment Coordinating Board, Bahlil Lahadalia, who said, “The coronavirus did not enter Indonesia because the permit was difficult.” The Minister of Health, Terawan, also joked by saying that the power of prayer prevents the coronavirus from entering Indonesia.

In addition to the denotative meaning as described above, the meme in Fig. 1 has a connotative meaning which is to show that officials in Indonesia still take COVID-19 lightly and they do not show any concern about the outbreak of the COVID-19 in Indonesia, and they (Indonesian officials) even use COVID-19 information as a joke. The meme above contains a myth that something that does not look real is not taken seriously, so it is used as a joke.

In addition to showing memes in the form of a collection of funny statements from Indonesian officials and politicians, netizens also posted funny memes about the coronavirus by displaying images of the SpongeBob cartoon character along with hilarious dialogues related to

the coronavirus (Fig. 2). The dialogue shown in the meme is a conversation between a doctor played by Patrick and a patient played by SpongeBob. The funny dialogues of these two cartoon characters link the coronavirus with Chinese mobile phone brands.

The contents of the funny dialogue between SpongeBob and Patrick quoted by the meme shared in the WA group “Pojok NTB” can be quoted as follows:

SpongeBob: So I got the coronavirus, doctor? What's the reason, doctor? I'm not Chinese, I'm not Chinese either.
 Patrick: By the way, the doctor wants to ask, what's the brand of your cellphone?
 SpongeBob: My HP brand is Xiaomi. Why, doctor?
 Patrick: Well, that's the reason. All cellphones made in China must have the virus.

In addition to the denotative meaning as described above, the meme which adopts the funny dialogue of the cartoon characters SpongeBob and Patrick has a connotative meaning. The meme maker wants to remind netizens to be careful with Chinese products because they have the potential to spread the coronavirus. The meme maker's concern is quite reasonable because the coronavirus that has spread around the world was first discovered in Wuhan City, China. Another connotative meaning of the meme is that the meme maker shows his sentiments towards Chinese products (especially the cell phone brand Xiaomi) by associating one of the mobile phone brands

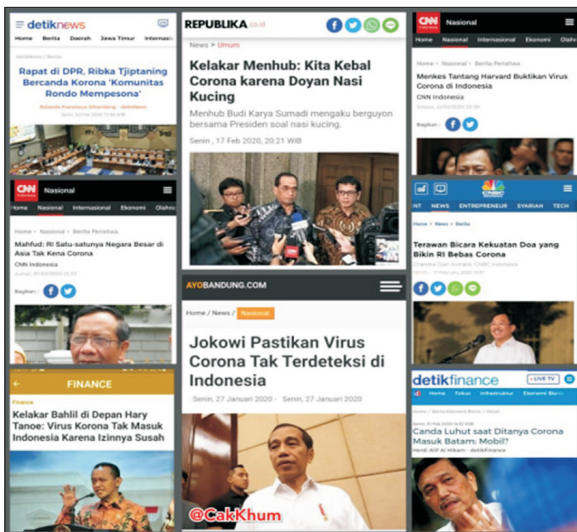


Fig. 1. Meme collection of statements by Indonesian officials and politicians about coronavirus.



Fig. 2. Coronavirus meme using SpongeBob cartoon character.

from China with the coronavirus that is currently endemic. The meme also has the potential to re-strengthen earlier myths related to the negative perceptions of Indonesians about China, such as being the source country of communist ideology that had instigated a rebellion in Indonesia, and being a supplier of labor in Indonesia that pushed indigenous people out of the way.

If in Fig. 2 netizens make funny memes by making dialogue between SpongeBob and Patrick cartoon characters, the meme in Fig. 3 uses funny memes by linking the coronavirus with the Toyota Corona car brand. Denotatively, the meme that was shared in the “S2 Komunikasi 2002” WA group used marketing language that wanted to quickly sell an old 1973 Toyota Corona car on the grounds that it felt slandered as a virus spreader. The connotative meaning of the meme in Fig. 3 is that the meme maker is using the word “corona” as the name of the virus that is being discussed by the world community to promote the Corona car brand (one of the car models produced by Toyota) to the public.

The three pictures above are memes related to the coronavirus that were shared and discussed in the WA groups “Pojok NTB” and “S2 Komunikasi 2002” when the virus had not been confirmed in Indonesia. The three meme images show a relaxed response to the deadly virus. The memes do not show the concern of Indonesian netizens about the dangers of the virus. They made the information about COVID-19 into a joke by adopting a cute cartoon character (SpongeBob), showing pictures of cars branded “corona,” and taking photos of Indonesian figures and politicians along with their “not serious” statements about the coronavirus.

4.2. Memes When COVID-19 Was Confirmed and Spread in Indonesia

When President Joko Widodo announced the exis-



Fig. 3. Coronavirus meme using car brands.

tence of an Indonesian citizen who was confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 on March 1, 2020, social media in Indonesia was enlivened by discussions about how the government and the community could face or overcome COVID-19. One of the dominant topics of conversation on social media was related to the lockdown policy. According to Lidwina (2020), during the period March 12-23, 2020, the lockdown (regional/country quarantine) became the most discussed issue, namely 38% of discourse.

Netizens continued to consistently use memes as a way to express the condition of COVID-19 when the virus was confirmed in Indonesia. Memes at this time were more related to the lockdown policy. From 15 memes shared in the WA group “Pojok NTB” during March to April 2020, 11 of them were memes related to the lockdown. The dominance of memes about the lockdown policy was also seen in the WA group “S2 Komunikasi 2002,” which found seven out of 10 types of memes about lockdown that were shared and discussed in the WA group.

From all types of memes related to the lockdown, three memes have been discussed for a relatively long time by the WA group. The three memes all contain pornographic elements that are packed with funny language. In Fig. 4, for example, a meme is shared with a picture of a housewife leaning on the sofa in a drunken state because she has a craving for lingerie. This meme image is equipped with a pornographic sentence, namely “Due to husband working at home” then followed by the sentence “Open laptop once, open negligee 3 times a day.” The sentence is also the denotative meaning of the meme.



Fig. 4. Craving housewife meme.

This meme was discussed more intensely in the WA group “S2 Komunikasi 2002” than in the WA group “Pojok NTB.” Even though this meme contains pornographic sentences, it has an academic element because it includes the sentence “open laptop,” so that discussions in WA groups consisting of academics such as those in the “S2 Komunikasi 2002” group look more connected. The meme in Fig. 4 has a connotative meaning in that the togetherness between a husband and wife who are constantly at home during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic makes the frequency of sex between them increase. The word “open negligee” in the meme (Fig. 4) is connotatively interpreted as “sex,” so the word “open negligee 3 times a day” can be interpreted as having sex three times a day.

The meme in Fig. 4 also contains a connotative meaning that contains an allusion to the lack of productivity of husband and wife during the lockdown period. The word “open laptop” connotes work and productivity to get money and materials, so the meme contains a connotative meaning that productive work (which is analogous with “opening laptop”) is less frequent (once) compared to sex (3 times), which is identical with activities to get pleasure and enjoyment (not activities to get money and materials).

The meme related to the lockdown in Fig. 5 is more pornographic than the meme in Fig. 4. The meme in Fig. 5 is more intensely discussed in the WA group “Pojok NTB” with various comments, in contrast to the minimal response from members of the WA group “S2 Komunikasi 2002” when the same meme (meme Fig. 5) was shared by a member of the alumni group of the Communication

Masters Program at Padjadjaran University.

The meme in Fig. 5 shows a young mother walking from the bathroom wearing a towel while saying “the risk of a man staying at home, taking a bath 4 times a day,” followed by the sentence below “Lock Down Lurrrr.” In addition to this denotative meaning, the meme in Fig. 5 also has a connotative meaning that the lockdown policy has caused the husband to always stay at home and the frequency of having sex to increase (four times a day). The word “bath” in the meme has a relationship with sexual activity, so the woman in the figure is connoted as a wife who has just finished taking a *junub*/obligatory bath (in Islamic teachings) after having sex with her husband.

The memes seen in Figs. 4 and 5 contain myths surrounding the phenomenon of sex between husband and wife, where the man (husband) is always positioned as the party who has hegemony in sex, such as determining the time and frequency of sex. It has become a common understanding and tradition in society that it is normal for the husband to be the initiator in sex, and a wife does not have the power to refuse; rejection of sexual invitations from her husband is not allowed according to Islamic teachings, as the words of the Prophet Muhammad saw as following:

Abu Hurairah said, Rasulullah SAW said, “If a husband invites his wife to have sex, but she (the wife) does not fulfill her husband’s invitation, until that night her husband is angry, then she (the wife) gets the curse of the angels until dawn.” (HR Muslim)

The sentences in the meme (memes of Figs. 4 and 5) explicitly show the hegemony of men in terms of sex between husband and wife. The husband is always positioned as the dominant party in determining the pattern of sex with his wife. Therefore, the two memes emphasize the myth that mentions the dominance of men (husbands) in matters of sex between husband and wife.

Memos related to the lockdown policy were also expressed by netizens in the form of cartoons. This can be seen in the discussion of members of the WA group “Pojok NTB.” One of the members of the WA group shared a meme in the form of a cartoon featuring Indonesia’s dangdut singer, Rhoma Irama, with his partner in the movie *Begadang* (1978), Ani (Fig. 6).

The sentence in the meme (Fig. 6) contains a denotative meaning, namely a dialogue between Rhoma Irama and Ani. Rhoma Irama says, “Don’t go out first Ani... Pleasee...,” and then Ani answers by saying, “Bulls—t,



Fig. 5. Meme of young mother who just came out of the bathroom.



Fig. 6. Meme of dangdut singer cartoons and his partner.

when you go out first, you usually go to sleep...” Rhoma Irama’s statement in this meme can be related to the lockdown situation because it forbids going out. But by analyzing Ani’s answer, this meme may be connotatively considered pornographic, because these answers are words that are usually spoken by wives when having sex with their husbands, or based on the experience of husband and wife who are tired and sleep soundly after having sex. Thus, the word “come out” written in the meme is no longer interpreted as leaving the house during the lockdown policy but connotatively means releasing semen during sex.

The meme in Fig. 6 also negates the myth or common sense understanding of society about the power between husband and wife in having sex. The meme shows that husbands are considered “weak” in sex because they are said to be the party who gave up first, or their semen came out first so that the sexual activity ended and the husband fell fast asleep afterwards. The sentences in this meme are considered relevant to the myth that people understand (especially those who are married) that women (wives) are stronger and more durable in having sex than men (husbands).

4.3. Memes During the Distribution of COVID-19 Social Assistance

When the COVID-19 pandemic did not show any sign of ending after being endemic for approximately four months in Indonesia, many people became economically affected. The governments in central, provincial, and district levels began to distribute social assistance to the community. Mainstream mass media and online media also shared the agenda for distributing social assistance



Fig. 7. Meme critique of social assistance discrimination.

to victims of COVID-19. During May to June 2020, the headlines of national newspapers were dominated by news about social assistance. The *Republika Daily*, for example, published a news story with the title “Kemensos allocates cash social assistance for 50,234 families in Karawang” on May 17, 2020, and the June 4, 2020 edition of the *Kompas Daily* lowered the headline with the title “Social assistance is complicated because of data.”

The intensity of the publication of the COVID-19 social assistance on mass media and online media was in line with the hectic public discussion about the same thing on social media. There are at least three types of memes about COVID-19 social assistance that are shared and intensely discussed in the WA group “Pojo NTB” and “S2 Komunikasi 2002.” The three memes contain criticisms of the implementation of COVID-19 social assistance, but with different images and sentences. The meme in Fig. 7, for example, contains criticism of discrimination in the distribution of social assistance by the government by using caricatures.

The cartoon meme shown in Fig. 7 shows a dialogue between a mother and her child. The mother asks her son, “Where are you going?” and the son answers, “I want to pick up groceries.” In the following picture the child is shown walking home. Seeing her child return home without carrying groceries, the mother asks again, “Why did you come back again?” The child answers this question by saying, “I forgot that the head of the Neighborhood Association (RT) is not our relative.” The meme not only has a denotative meaning as described above but also has a certain connotative meaning. Connotatively, the meme in Fig. 7 criticizes the practice of nepotism carried out by

the apparatus at the neighborhood association level in determining the recipients of social assistance by prioritizing their own family members.

Another critical meme about COVID-19 social assistance was also conveyed by showing a figure of a person expressing his frustration by covering his face with the palm of his hand, with fingers full of gold rings (Fig. 8). Denotatively, the meme contains the meaning of someone who is confused because they do not get basic necessities while saying “I’m really dizzy because until now I haven’t gotten groceries.”

Connotatively, the meme in Fig. 8 implies criticism from social media users in Indonesia against the behavior of unscrupulous people who always expect help even though their economic condition is very well established. The meme also implies that the greedy attitude of the community contributes to the mistargeting of the distribution of social assistance. That is, the occurrence of mistargeting in the distribution of social assistance is not only caused by the attitude of discrimination and nepotism from government officials as distributors, but also because of the greedy attitude of the community as recipients.

The memes in Figs. 7 and 8 negate community myths surrounding the issue of social assistance, which are not far from discriminatory and mistargeted practices. Therefore, it can be said that the two memes represent public perceptions and judgements about implementation of the distribution of social assistance that is not on target. The survey of Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting in 2020, for example, stated that 49 percent of respondents assessed that social assistance from the government for overcoming

the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was still not on target (Saputri, 2020).

Netizen criticism grew louder when a corruption case of the COVID-19 social assistance fund was discovered involving the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, Juliari Batubara (Fig. 9). The meme features a photo of the Minister of Social Affairs handing a social assistance package to a mother, accompanied by the text of the minister’s words, “Excuse me ma’am, this is a little help for you, but I cut it off *ceban*.” This meme uses the word “*ceban*” (Mandarin) which means “ten thousand.” Denotatively, this meme informs about the distribution of basic food assistance activities carried out by the Minister of Social Affairs and the minister’s statement that he skimmed off some of the assistance.

This meme was intensely discussed in two WA groups (Pojok NTB and S2 Komunikasi 2002) when the Social Affairs Minister, Juliari Batubara, reported corruption in social assistance funds. News about this had gone viral in mainstream media and online media in early December 2020. The meme in Fig. 9 has a connotative meaning in the form of satire and criticism of the Minister of Social Affairs, who since that December 6 has been designated by the Corruption Eradication Commission as a corruption suspect of COVID-19 social assistance. The corruption carried out by the Minister of Social Affairs towards the COVID-19 social assistance funds made the public’s perception of corruption committed by government officials increasingly confirmed. The Global Corruption Barometer survey compiled by Transparency International in 2017 shows that 50 percent of the public considers government officials to be involved in corruption (Lokadata, 2017).



Fig. 8. Meme critique of rich people who hope for COVID-19 social assistance.



Fig. 9. Meme of satire and criticism of the Minister of Social Affairs.

4.4. Shifting Content of COVID-19 Memes: From Jokes to Pornography and Criticisms

There are three typologies of meme content submitted by Indonesian netizens related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The three typologies are shown at different times. In the early days before the coronavirus entered Indonesia, Indonesian netizens' memes were more dominated by funny meme content, while when the coronavirus was confirmed and spread in Indonesia, netizens' memes were dominated by pornographic content. And in the period of distributing social assistance to residents affected by the coronavirus, netizens made critical memes. It can be seen in Table 1.

The three typologies of meme content which are a form of public response to the development of information on COVID-19 in Indonesia found in this research reflect the character of social communication in the era of communication technology development. In the context of social communication, memes around COVID-19 are a form of implementing expressive functions in communication that are carried out by a person or group of people (Mulyana, 2018). The freedom of expression of the Indonesian people through memes is supported by the existence of government regulations and policies that provide space for freedom of expression for every citizen. However, it would be better if the energy of freedom of expression were channeled in a direction that is more contributive to social life. The results of this research find that not all memes made by Indonesian netizens contribute positively to social life because there are still memes that contain pornographic and funny content without social criticism.

Funny memes are inevitable, and humor has even become synonymous with memes. Memes created when the COVID-19 pandemic had not yet entered Indonesia, and during the COVID-19 lockdown period, were colored with funny and pornographic memes. This fact meets the

criteria for memes which contain phrases that are generally applied to describe propaganda on content such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to another via the Internet (Shifman, 2013). The appearance of funny memes during the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to reducing fear and anxiety. The research results of Hussein and Aljamili (2020) show that humorous memes on social media affect the public's perspective on coronavirus because humorous content conveyed through memes will relieve tension and fear.

This research not only found funny memes about COVID-19 but also funny/humorous memes that lead to taboo things to talk about, because they are related to husband and wife relationships such as sex. The porn-humorous meme content conveyed is not directly related to the reality of COVID-19. This meme phenomenon further emphasizes the existence of humor which is built from two or more unrelated contextual associations (Koestler, 1964). This has implications for the inclusion of issues that are not commonly discussed or are taboo in humor, so that humor is able to infuse taboo themes while still being acceptable to the public (Gilbert, 2004; Lee et al., 2017; Ruch, 2008).

The emergence of memes containing pornographic content during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is predicted to be related to the amount of free time that everyone has while at home. As it is known, the lockdown policy has stopped everyone's activities outside the home (including at the office) so that they automatically stay at home for a long time. If the free time cannot be filled with positive activities, it is very possible that negative activities such as making memes with porn content are carried out by someone. The results of Novita's research (2018) on the habits of teenagers regarding watching pornographic films are considered relevant to explain the phenomenon of memes with porn content on social media. One of the reasons why teenagers watch pornographic films according to Novita's research is because there is a lot of free time that is not used by someone with positive activities.

Publication and discussion of pornographic COVID-19 memes conducted by Indonesian netizens is very unfortunate, because ideally in the atmosphere of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, public participation is needed by sharing meme content on social media that strengthens the spirit of resistance against the coronavirus. Indonesian netizens have a lot to learn from the Nigerian community in using Internet memes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nigerians create Internet memes containing content against the coronavirus with creative

Table 1. The shifting of meme content in three stages of development and handling of COVID-19 in Indonesia

Stages of development and handling of COVID-19	Content and types of meme
1. Before COVID-19 confirmed in Indonesia	Funny memes
2. When COVID-19 was confirmed in Indonesia and lockdown policy applied	Porn memes
3. COVID-19 social assistance distribution period	Critical memes

and educational images and sentences, as a form of their awareness of the dangers of COVID-19 as well as regarding their participation in fighting the virus originating from Wuhan, China (Msughter, 2020). The use of memes with positive content to fight the spread of COVID-19 in their respective countries is also carried out by the people of Malaysia and Singapore (Abidin, 2020). However, it does not mean that pornographic memes are not contributing to society during the pandemic. At least by reading and viewing pornographic memes related to COVID-19, people can ease tensions and eliminate fear amid the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic that is endemic in their area.

One of the positive aspects of memes related to the COVID-19 pandemic found in this research is memes that contain social criticism content. Meme content that contains social criticism from netizens during the distribution of COVID-19 social assistance is a form of community participation by criticizing policies made by government institutions when facing certain issues (Widiastuti et al., 2020), as part of the function of memes as a forum for channeling social criticism (Nasrullah & Rustandi, 2016; Shifman, 2013; Widiastuti et al., 2020). In the context of this research, critical memes submitted by netizens or members of the WA group are carried out to criticize every policy or attitude and opinion of the authorities in handling the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. The findings of this research are relevant to the study of Al-lifiansyah (2016), which found that memes developed into a new communication style capable of containing political content or a means to criticize the policies of the state elite. Therefore, the results of this research can serve as a warning to every government official not to ignore the pandemic even though it was not confirmed in Indonesia at that time. The momentum before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic should have been used as a serious effort to take preventive steps, not belittled with jokes and funny words. The results of this research are also a strong warning for officials not to skim social assistance for victims of pandemics (or other disasters in general) and become a reference for the government to make regulations that are able to minimize the occurrence of corruption in the distribution of social assistance.

This research not only reveals three typologies of meme content related to COVID-19 in Indonesia, but also finds a correlation between news content about COVID-19 from mainstream and online mass media and the choice of meme content shared and discussed by netizens, especially members of the WA group. This data confirms

the assumptions of the Agenda Setting theory/model proposed by McCombs and Shaw (as cited in Effendy, 2003, p. 287). According to this model, if the media puts pressure on an event, then the media will influence the audience to consider it important. Memes that are shared and discussed in WA media groups are a form of response from social media users to developments that occur in their environment, or current and hot issues published in the mass media and online. This is reinforced by the similarities between the meme content that is shared and discussed with issues related to COVID-19 that are currently being published by mass media.

The mass media as a provider of information about events in society and the world (McQuail, 2003) have been used by the public as a reference related to the development of COVID-19. Information about COVID-19 from the mass media is included in the category of emergency information and is urgently needed by the public. Research by Zhang et al. (2017) found that there was a fast response from social media users to health emergency information from the mass media. The findings above are relevant to the research results of Nielsen Television Audience Measurement (Lubis, 2020) which found an increasing number of television viewers in Indonesia since COVID-19 was confirmed in the country. The public's need for information on COVID-19 makes them rely on mass media news. This assumption is emphasized in the dependency theory of mass communication effects, which explains that the more people rely on something that needs to be fulfilled by using media, the more important is the role of media in one's life (Baran & Davis, 2010). The theoretical assumptions above confirm the results of this research which found a correlation between information on the development of COVID-19 from the mass media and meme content produced and shared by the public on social media.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The shift in meme content related to COVID-19 shared by netizens on social media correlates with the development of COVID-19 in Indonesia, which is supported by impressions of information through mass media reports and online media. In Indonesia, people make funny memes joking about officials with the impression of disparaging them, without showing concern about the dangers of the coronavirus. People also make memes containing humor that link the coronavirus with things that seem Chinese. When the mass media intensively re-

ported on the lockdown policy after the coronavirus was confirmed in Indonesia, people were aggressively creating porn-content memes related to husband and wife sex during the lockdown process. Likewise, when the corruption case of the COVID-19 social assistance fund went viral in the mass media, the public also made critical memes as a form of their protest against the unfair distribution of basic necessities and the behavior of officials involved in the corruption of the COVID-19 social assistance fund.

Information about the COVID-19 pandemic from mass media and online media is not only used as a source of knowledge and reference in responding to the health emergency situation during the pandemic, but also as a reference and inspiration in conducting social criticism through memes. This finding further strengthens the assumption of the agenda setting theory, which states that the mass media has the power to influence its audience so that they also consider the importance of an agenda that is set or considered important by the mass media.

One of the limitations of this research is the limited number of memes analyzed (only nine memes) and the limited number of WA groups studied (only two WA groups) so that they cannot represent all the thoughts and consciences of the Indonesian people at every stage of development in handling COVID-19 in the country. Nevertheless, the results of this research at least provide an overview of people's thoughts and feelings (which are expressed in the form of memes on social media) regarding the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, because the nine memes selected are memes that are dominantly circulating on social media, and two WA groups represent national and regional scales. Critical memes about handling COVID-19 in Indonesia revealed in this research can be a lesson for the public, politicians, and government officials to be more precise in giving statements, acting, and making policies when responding to and dealing with pandemics such as COVID-19, which is endemic in Indonesia. Therefore, this research is expected to have implications for the formulation of appropriate policies and the availability of strong human resources in handling COVID-19 particularly, and other pandemics in Indonesia generally.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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