

# THE USE OF MEME AS A REPRESENTATION OF PUBLIC OPINION IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF MEME ABOUT BEKASI IN PATH AND TWITTER

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## ABSTRACT

*Article aimed at exploring the connection between meme in social media and public opinion representation. Object examined in this study was the meme about the social condition in Bekasi. A qualitative descriptive method was applied to analyze issues that are expressed by meme about Bekasi and the motivation of distributing them in social media. The result shows that opinion expressed in meme could carry more than one issues, such as distance, bad traffic, extreme hot temperature, and damaged roads. The motivation of using meme is because it is funny, easily understood, and more likely to get a response. The result also shows that responding to a meme by retweeting or repathing do not necessarily mean agreement with the issues.*

**Keywords:** meme, public opinion, representation theory, social media.

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is a dynamic process that modified times to times. Computer technology and internet as new media have varied and even changed man's way of communication. People once went online seeking the anonymity it offered (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). They now more often use the Internet to socialize with people they do know and expand their circle of friends. The Internet challenges the right to freedom of expression. The Internet empowers freedom of expression by providing individuals with new means of expressions. Media to express our opinion are varied. Social media becomes the popular alternative. Social media varies from blogging, micro blogging, and social networks, as Safko (2010) have argued as The Social Media Trinity. We can see how personal opinion posted on social media then became viral and caused pros and cons, and soon developed as public opinion. It is interesting how most people share their personal thought in the public sphere. It is even more interesting to know why they do that.

Social media nowadays is used for expressing the opinion about issues related to unfair practices and human interest. During 2012-2015, there were cases of personal/group opinion about human interest issues in Indonesia posted in social media and attracted public attention, for example coins for Prita, coins for Balqis, a case about deadly car accident related to Indonesian Minister's son in Jakarta's freeway, a female student' rage about Jogjakarta in her Path account, and many others. They were all exposed to media (conventional media) after become viral and trending discussion in social media.

Opinion is an expressed statement that widely expressed in words, signs, cues or other meaningful ways that easily understood (Arifin, 2010). Popular expressed statement that profoundly facilitated by social media is the meme. Recently, the visual appearance on the internet has become

fashionable in Indonesia. Thousands of images appear daily in social media. Those images are often added with texts that contain witty critics. Issues brought up by those memes are often the representation of human interest issues or common issues like the love story, life experiences, education, and even religion. Those images with texts are called internet meme. With just one click, the issue attached in meme easily becomes viral and the trending topic that everybody talks about.

In late 2014, there was a posting in twitter saying how hot was the temperature in Bekasi (one of a district near Jakarta, Indonesia). The tweet provoked more comments with more issues brought to the front, and funny memes appear. After being retweeted by Twitter celebrities (the terms for Twitter accounts with a big number of followers), the Bekasi meme became the trending topic. 'Bekasi being bullied' or 'Meme Bekasi' became discussion with more serious tone when TV talk show brought the issue inviting government officials and politicians to respond to.

The aim of this study is to explore the connection between meme in social media and public opinion representation. This research focuses on a case of social critics expressed through meme about the condition in Bekasi. It offers a perspective of communication dynamic in conveying a message for the wide audience. Funny memes created to criticize the condition in Bekasi is a representation of public opinion about the traffic jam, damaged roads, hotter temperature (compared to any other places), and transportation issues. The issues that have been long experienced by citizens with no significant improvement attracted citizens to express their opinion in social media.

In relation to that, there are several concepts that used to be references such as Media Representation Theory, public opinion, and the concept of the meme. Representation is the construction of ideas about a subject through some means of communication (Burton, 2010). Representation refers to the construction in any media (especially the mass media) of aspects of reality such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities, and other abstract concepts. Such representation may be in speech or writing as well as still or moving pictures. Representations of social groups help create identities for their subjects. Representations create meanings not only for the media audience as onlookers but also for the audience as individuals and as subjects of the representation. Representation is something that is about us, not just about other people. More specific, representation is a process to construct social groups' identity by media. When representation is discussed in terms of social groups and images of people, its significance is not simply about appearance. It is about the substance of ideas invoked about that group. (Burton, 2010).

This representation concept relates to stereotypes and meaning formation. What are represented to us through media are the meanings about the world and the way we understand the world. The stereotype example done by the media is the figure of a woman as not a very good driver, they cannot park a car properly, which has something to do with their lack of spatial awareness.

*"... this means that it is seen as natural that a given social group should be represented in a certain way. It is seen as natural that the representation should carry particular ideas about that group-and not other ideas. It makes negative ideas seem normal and unchallengeable."* (Burton, 2010).

The study about Public Opinion has been an interesting subject, especially in a current digital technology. Opinion is an expressed statement that widely expressed in words, signs, cues or other ways containing meaning that easily understood (Arifin, 2010). Cutlip and Center (as cited in Olli, 2011) have said that public opinion is many individual opinion accumulation about an issue in an open conversation and has an influence towards a group of people. Opinion is understood as an answer to the question or problem faced in a certain situation. Even though its validity is thinner than its positive knowledge, but it is stronger than the allegation or an impression. As formulated by Lane and David O. Sears (as cited in Arifin, 2010), "...an opinion is an answer that is given to a question in a given situation". Added by Young in Arifin (2010), "...opinion means a belief or a conviction more

verifiable and stronger in intensity than a mere hunch or impression but less valid than truly verifiable or positive knowledge. Similar research related to memetic public opinion done by Bastos (2011) has argued that trending topics in Twitter form a digital public opinion that challenges the “rich-get-richer” dynamics described by Barabási (1999) as a common feature in systems such as genetic networks and the World Wide Web. Even though the propagation of opinion in Twitter networks follows a scale-free network, there is no substantial evidence of any power-law distribution. This is mainly because unlike systems based on power-law distribution, the propagation of opinions in Twitter networks does not rely on scale invariance, but rather on effective scale variation—that is, on memeotic variance.

Related research on public opinion in social media done by Xiong & Liu (2014) has collected a large amount of user interaction information from an actual social network, for example, Twitter, and analyze the dynamic sentiments of users about different topics to investigate realistic opinion evolution. The result showed two nontrivial results. First, public opinion often evolves to an ordered state in which one opinion predominates, but not to complete consensus. Second, agents are reluctant to change their opinions, and the distribution of the number of individual opinion changes follows a power law.

The term of “meme” is first introduced by Dawkins (2007), a biologist from England. Its word rooted from Greek: *mimeme* which means “imitation”. The examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, and ways of making pots or of building arches. He has made an analogy of meme with the gene in the human body. The meme has similar characteristics compared to the gene. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 2007).

Genes multiply from a human body to his/her child body, while meme multiplies from a human cognition to another human cognition through many media, such as human interaction, advertising, video, picture, lecture, book, and others. Those replicable ideas have the power to influence human behavior to human culture. In brief, this meme is defined as an idea, behavior or style which can spread from one person to another through their mouths, writings, gestures, rituals, education, and indoctrination or in other forms that can be imitated. For Dawkins, a meme is a unit of information but also a pattern that can influence its surroundings—that is, it has causal agency—and can propagate.

In internet visual cultural context, especially in digital photography, the meme is created through replica process and modification from photography images that provided by Google machine. The creator sometimes only needs to complete the photograph with text, or with diminishing, or adding some elements through a simple digital creation process, depends on what information context needs to be delivered. After the creation process is finished, meme photograph or picture can be spread through the services such as share, retweet or repost in social media.

Some memes, like some genes, achieve brilliant short-term success in spreading rapidly but do not last long in the meme pool. This is the analog of natural selection (Dawkins, 2007). Memes in internet visual context may achieve success (could be measured by numbers of people spreading it or talking about it), but do not last long because other memes might come into surface.

## METHODS

The study aims at understanding how public opinion could be represented by meme in social media that creating some direction for future studies. The research is using qualitative descriptive approach by observation. Observation is a method to monitor closely and directly without any mediator about a particular object (Kriyantono, 2008).

Object of this research is meme in social media Path and Twitter about condition in Bekasi. In-depth interview is also conducted to elaborate the motivation of posting/creating meme in social media. According to Berger (as cited in Kriyantono, 2008), interview is the conversation between a researcher – the one who seeks information- with informant –the one who assumes to have significant information about an issue. It is a data collecting method that is used to gather information straight from the resources. This research is using triangulation methods, namely data triangulation (interview) and theory triangulation (study literature to interpret interview result).

Informants for the interview are chosen based on their activities in social media. All informants have been active in social media more than 4 years, three of them are considered as digital influencers (based on impact and the number of follower, also the role as buzzer). The identity of the informants is showed in following Table.

Table Informants' Information

| No | Name                                | Age | Occupation                   | Domicile  | Start using social media                     | Active social media |
|----|-------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------|-----------|--|---------------------|
| 1  | Wicaksono@ndorokakung               | 45  | Media Activist               | Tangerang | 2004 (blog),<br>Twitter & FB, Path<br>(2012) | Twitter, Path       |
| 2  | Derry Yan@derry_yan<br>@pejuangkuis | 22  | Private Employee             | Bekasi    | 2011 (Twitter and<br>Path)                   | Twitter             |
| 3  | Yuna Davina@ydavina                 | 37  | Private Employee             | Jakarta   | 2009 (Twitter)<br>2012 (Path)                | Path                |
| 4  | Yustina Tantri@yustinaw             | 30  | Media Activist and<br>Writer | Jakarta   |  | Twitter             |

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are ten memes about Bekasi being observed from Path and Twitter. Issues are categorized by four categories, for instance, distance (in particular between Jakarta-Bekasi and vice versa), bad traffic, hot temperature, and damaged roads. Those issues are all related to managing urban planning poorly. Some memes could be interpreted to more than one issue. This is due to the interrelated issues, or one issue can actually impact others. For example, because of many damaged roads, the traffic becomes jam-packed. Therefore the traveling time becomes longer, and the distance seems further than it actually is.

According to Yustina Tantri, one of the informants, a meme could carry more than one message or critic, and it is more appealing than just words because of images or photos with witty quotes. All of these make meme is easier to become viral. Therefore, the reason people in distributing memes is because it is so appealing or interesting, that one cannot resist but to share it with others. When you see an interesting meme in your timeline (from your social media account), you tend to share or retweet or repath it, so your friends can see the meme, and you will probably get a name for yourself as someone 'funny' or 'very-update' or 'cool'.

As Livingstone (2007) has suggested that new media has the ubiquity and interactivity characteristic:

*“...ubiquity is the sense that new media technologies 'affect everyone in the societies where they are employed', even if not everyone in those societies actually use them...the immediacy, responsiveness, and social presence of interaction via new media channels constitutes a qualitatively and substantively different experience than what was possible via mass media channels (even those to which the term 'interactive' was sometimes too generously applied, such as remote control television).”*

Wicaksono, more popular as @ndorokakung, said that one creates the meme to respond to situations they see or experience. It does not necessarily have the serious intention; it could be just because it is funny. They just want to share their experience, in a hope that people (their inner circle) would agree or feel empathy. In an era of “clicking monkey”, it is easy to share and reshare everything with just one click.

While according to Yuna, the use of meme could be as one’s way to be famous, especially when people repath or retweet the meme. Derry (@derry\_yan) also stated the same opinion, as a creator of one of the memes about Bekasi (and many another meme about other issues). He mentioned about becoming existing and leaving footprints in social media as the reasons to use the meme. Derry, as a result, has already made a name for himself and been followed by many people (on his Twitter account). He is now –what we call as- digital influencer. Products or politician use his ‘account’ to say something (mention) about their products or value.

As McLuhan (as cited in Arifin, 2010) once said, “medium is the message”, computer and internet as media to convey messages (texts and images) have formed the way human communicates and shares experiences. And Nasrullah (2014) also suggested that virtual interaction offers self-definition and self-invention. Every individual has the unlimited chance to create himself in the cyber world that will represent him to play his role on the internet. Added by Witty and Joinson (2009) that in much online interaction people are strategically managing their online identity to meet both their own goals and the expectations of the other.

Informants all agreed that public opinion could be in a form of meme. The meme is one way to express public opinion. This is in line with Arifin (2010) has stated that opinion is an expressed statement, widely expressed in words and also with signs or cues or other ways containing meaning that easily understood. Moore (as cited in Arifin, 2010) has argued that the root formation of the opinion process is an attitude (attitude). Attitude is a feeling or mood of a person about a person, organization, problem or object. Attitude describes the predisposing one to evaluate the controversial issue by way of a pleasant or unpleasant. In short, the attitude is a way to look at the situation. The attitude expressed is an opinion.

However, all informants also agreed that opinion (opinions in general, and especially opinion about Bekasi) expressed through memes in social media could not afford a big impact. This is due to the limitation of memes to last longer since there will always be more memes (and opinions) shared in social media. The new memes (with other issues) will overshadow the previous memes. This is an accordance with Dawkins (2007) “... Some memes, like some genes, achieve brilliant short-term success in spreading rapidly but do not last long in the meme pool. This is the analog of natural selection.”

Representation refers to the construction in any media (especially the mass media) of aspects of ‘reality’ such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts. Such representation may be in speech or writing as well as still or moving pictures. In semiotic terms, the signs stand for what is represented, objects or ideas. But they are not the thing itself (Burton, 2010).

In one meme about the 'distance' needs to be taken between Jakarta and Bekasi, it is described as the use of Apollo or spacecraft to go to Bekasi. It is related to other memes that described the position or location of Bekasi that is in outer space, between the earth and the moon. Another meme is taken from the famous Armageddon movie (1998), the images showed when Bruce Willis and Liv Tyler having a 'made-up conversation' about Willis' plan to go far away and asked Tyler - his daughter in the movie - to take care. When asked where to, Willis said 'Bekasi' with a picture of Apollo as a closing. In semiotic terms, the Apollo is used to emphasize the 'idea' that Bekasi is so far away (outer space). Apollo is the representation of 'the vehicle used to go long distance' and outer space is the representation of 'a place far away'. In reality, we know that it is not the case. Apollo is not for long distance journey, and Bekasi is not in outer space. Reality is always represented-what we treat as 'direct' experience is 'mediated' by perceptual codes. Representation always involves 'the construction of reality (Burton, 2010).

In another meme, the heavy traffic in Bekasi is represented by the images of Dwayne Johnson taken from one of his movies. The 'made-up conversation' in the picture describing how Dwayne is happy because he finally could buy a house located in Bekasi. His happiness soon becomes shocked when he is told that he needs to leave the house in the wee hours to go to work/office. Otherwise, he would be stuck in the heavy traffic. The heavy traffic is closely related to the traveling time. Other memes describe how the traveling time to and from Bekasi would take long hours and even days to get to the destination. It is rather exaggerating, but that skeptical comment represents the time sacrificed by the dwellers every day.

In another meme, there is a picture of damaged roads with the text saying that if suddenly you find damaged roads along your journey, it means you are already in Bekasi. For sure, Bekasi is not the only district with damaged roads. Jakarta as a capital city in Indonesia has also damaged roads in the certain part. Attributing damaged roads with Bekasi is to represent how bad the roads condition. But how bad is bad?

*Because "one cannot assume that all people read all representations in the same way. Any analysis should be careful not to accuse an image of being patronizing or demeaning because such a judgment speaks on behalf of a group who may not feel the same way" (Hartley, 2002).*

When considering media representations, rather than looking for accuracy, it is perhaps more useful to understand the discourses that support the image in question.

## CONCLUSIONS

Article has presented how social media is used to express the opinion. One way to express the opinion is by creating and posting the meme. Meme or internet meme is the combination of images and texts that contain social critics or other human interest issues that could easily draw public attention. Representation of public opinion in a form of the meme is more favorable because it could be multi-interpretation and more attention-grabbing. Picture paints thousand words. Meme contains many meanings (issues).

Article also reveals that the tendency to replica or forward meme on the internet is not always directly proportional with the agreement to the issues being brought to the front. Sophisticated gadget and internet connection make people tend to share everything they see in their circle of friends in social media without any serious intention. The needs to leave footprints in social media by retweeting or repathing memes override other reasons. Updating a status, even just forwarding memes, is important to stay updated and maintain existence.

A meme could be a representation of public opinion. However, as we are all aware how dynamic social media is the issues could not last very long. Therefore, the impact of social critics in meme could not contribute much to public policy. This study has some limitation. Therefore, it needs further study to elaborate the progress of humans' culture in communicating through the internet. The Internet and social media development bring new phenomenon in communication. It opens more chances to do further research.

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