

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Sara Mills on Popular Memes in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the elements within memes and critique the hidden messages that appeared on the internet and social media. Employing a critical discourse analysis method from Sara Mills' approach, the researcher examined two selected memes to be analyzed and reviewed. Key aspects of this analysis included power dynamics, identity, linguistic structure, intertextuality, and ideology of the memes. The result of the study revealed that the first meme highlighted a critique of technological advancements in the learning process. The first meme revealed that the students' misuse of AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools like ChatGPT led to increasing dependency on technology for the study. Academic integrity builds essential skills such as creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving that AI cannot replace. The need for balanced and proper technology use toward technology in education has become a social critique and stakeholder's concern for technology integration in education. On the other side, academic pressure also fostered students to an over-reliance on technology. Furthermore, the researcher found that technological innovation significantly challenged academic integrity in learning. Besides, the following meme issues illustrated two different orientation practices for new students. Inappropriate academic practice during orientation day showed ideological gaps and psychological impacts on students, such as trauma, fear, and low self-esteem. Employing humor with an element of sarcasm and satire, a clear message aiming stakeholders in higher academics to stop inappropriate practices over the years

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Style, Academic Integrity, Memes*

INTRODUCTION

Memes are a cultural unit widely utilized by social media users. It is typically formed through images, videos, or text; memes spread rapidly via the internet and often contain various elements (Murfianti, 2020), such as humor, satire, and irony. Richard Dawkins introduced the meme concept in his 1976 book "The Selfish Gene." Today, memes are used in a broad range of contexts (Davis, 2017). In some communities, memes are also used for advertising and brand introduction in marketing (Malodia et al., 2022). In everyday communication, memes are also sometimes used to react or respond to what is on social media, such as photos, statements, and documents (Grundlingh, 2018). Therefore, youth frequently engage with memes in digital content due to their ease of sharing and adaptability.

Memes represent information transferred from one individual to another, primarily through the digital realm. The Selfish Gene (Davis, 2017) conceptualized memes as analogous to genes, explaining how ideas, culture, and information spread within society. He defined memes as the minor units of idea transmission and their impact on psychology, sociology, media studies, and internet culture. Dynamic and more diverse people's ways of communication created a new spectrum of how messages are delivered to the public. An indirect way of communication leads to various understandings and is more subjective. Information was often spread by the individual (influencer), content, platforms, trusted sources, and preferences and beliefs of individuals (Quinn et al., 2016).

The use of memes has become a highly effective way of communication. For instance, memes function as a rhetoric visualization to enable people to engage with cultural issues (Herbert, 2019). Moreover, memes also create an emotional engagement by combining visual and textual elements to activate individuals to memorize and engage with the contents (Jenkins et al., 2013). In other words, the use of memes is beyond communication tools. It conveyed emotions, reactions to events, or political critique from the creator of a meme and its objective. Memes can also be factual information towards sensitive information (Ireland, 2018). On social media, memes have a significant influence due to their extensive reach to the audience. Their usage has expanded beyond personal interactions; companies and institutions increasingly adopt memes for marketing and branding purposes. Organizations use memes as strategic tools to target broader and more specific audiences. By leveraging humor and popular culture, memes are believed to foster closer and more meaningful connections with audiences (Fitrianto et al., 2022).

In contemporary digital culture, memes have become integral. They serve as an alternative form of communication, reflecting the modern era's dynamic and widespread social and cultural trends (Allifiansyah, 2016). This paper aims to analyze the elements embedded in memes and critique the hidden messages behind their humor and satire, often delivered through concise visual and textual formats. The critical discourse analysis in this article is based on Sara Mills' framework, focusing on power, identity, and ideology. This study will examine memes circulating in the digital sphere from a distinct analytical perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Discourse Analysis

In critical discourse analysis, texts or images, such as memes, can be examined from multiple perspectives, including subject, object, gender, and concepts of intersectionality within the text. Additionally, ideology, sociocultural factors, and cultural norms are often embedded and identified

in various discourses, texts, or images. Critical discourse analysis allows researchers to explore how texts or images serve as tools or media for diverse purposes (Carpenter & Singh, 2023).

Critical discourse analysis involves several stages to understand how language, norms, or word choices function as metaphors that convey specific meanings and perspectives in the context of ideology and culture. Social texts can reflect domination by particular groups, ethnicities, or societal layers. Consequently, intersectionality is often presented in the texts or objects analyzed. Aspects such as race, gender, and social class contribute to creating complex meanings (Ferreira & Vasconcelos, 2019). By following these steps, critical discourse analysis reveals how language and discourse play a significant role in shaping our understanding of texts and the world around us.

Critical Discourse Analysis by Sara Mills

Sara Mills (2001) is renowned for her contributions to linguistics and discourse analysis, particularly in exploring how power and identity are shaped through language. Her book “Discourse, the New Critical Idiom” examined how language, power dynamics, and identity are constructed. This study applies her framework to analyze memes through the following stages: 1) Subject and Object Identification, which analyses memes by identifying the subject (the actor) and the object (the target of the action). The relationship between the subject and object becomes evident through this analysis. 2) Narrative Structure Analysis: This step examines how the narrative is constructed, including the storyline, setting, and characterization of the analyzed object. It also uncovers ideological patterns embedded within the text. 3) Intersectionality Concept: This analysis considers additional factors like race and social class to understand the complexities of identity and power represented in the text. 4) Discourse Deconstruction: This involves deconstructing the existing discourse by critiquing the underlying assumptions that shape the representation in the text. The goal is to expose biases and hidden ideologies within the narratives crafted by the meme creators. 5) Social and Cultural Context: Analyzing the social and cultural context helps to understand external influences on the representation in the text or image within the meme. By applying Sara Mills' theory to meme analysis, this study demonstrated how ideology, social context, and culture are constructed through language and visualized as memes.

METHOD

This study was conducted to uncover and analyze hidden messages of viral memes on the internet. Using critical discourse analysis from Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach.

Research Design

The research employed a critical discourse analysis from (Sara Mills, 2001) as a primary research design. Depth exploration of how language, visual elements, and ideologies contents of the memes analyzed were the reasons the researcher chose this research methodology. Critical discourse analysis analyzes sociocultural context to uncover hidden messages and information from the memes. Therefore, elements of analysis included the structure of a text, ideology input, tone, message, cultural background, and ideology. Those elements reveal the meaning and correlate it with the issue. A content analysis is also used as a supplementary method to support and code (Krippendorff, 2022). The components are analyzed using textual, visual, audio, themes, and trends within the meme.

Research Objects

The researcher selected two themes of the memes. The first theme addressed issues related to using artificial intelligence (AI) in education. Their memes were described for the first theme, particularly between students and technology. It was obtained from a website, borepanda.com (MaarsComics, n.d.), a sharing viral memes webpage. The second theme of the meme addressed an issue from academic orientation held in some countries. The researcher analyzed two memes. The researcher intended to see a contrast between memes from textual use and other visual elements to uncover a message behind it using CDA-based analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Critical discourse analysis methodology will explore how the language is framed through textual interpretation, element visualization, tone, ideology, and cultural background. Some other elements were also analyzed to see how they could engage and influence the audience. Moreover, content analysis is also implemented to code thematic components to understand the memes better. Employing critical discourse analysis from (Sara Mills, 2001) techniques, the researcher would try to reveal how texts or visuals can bring a message to the public. Additionally, the study considers the social and cultural context of the texts to provide a deeper understanding of how critical discourse analysis influences and persuades the public.

FINDINGS

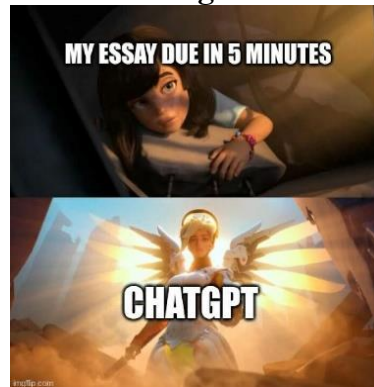
Meme series Teacher vs. artificial intelligence

The three memes below analyzed the fact that the first meme features a movie clip with different facial expressions presented. A subject revealed “true identity” from the student using ChatGPT on her assignment.

**Figure 1: Meme series
Teacher Vs Artificial
Intelligence**



**Figure 2: Meme series
Teacher Vs Artificial
Intelligence**



**Figure 3: Meme series
Teacher Vs Artificial
Intelligence**



A narrative story began with a response from ChatGpt, as illustrated by a man nodding in response to task completion. Facial expressions from both images presented another expression from the teacher, who was shocked by the student’s work. This visualization constructed a story, whereas “cheating” is prohibited in an academic setting. In other memes, it is presented in meme 2, whereas ChatGpt has become the most powerful tool to complete the task. A humorous story was created about the reliance on AI (ChatGPT) to complete a task. The subject is performed by a student who felt desperate and confused. The object revealed ChatGPT as an angle or savior to solve any problem or issues the subject dealt with. A narrative story was constructed as ChatGPT is a “solution” to her problem. A cultural context reflected modern students’ dependency on using artificial technology tools like ChatGpt as academic support. Based on Sara Mills’ critical discourse analysis framework, an analysis is done through the roles of subjects and social and cultural context. The subject is identified as a figure of a student. The teacher’s role uncovered the true identity of a student, as the AI logo is illustrated in the picture as ChatGPT. The object presented a masked figure, revealing that ChatGPT is included in the learning environment nowadays. The intertextuality of “Let me see who you are” and “I knew it” appeared as humor to engage the audience. The teacher has a dominant role in academic integrity during a learning process, and students performed by an AI underscored academic dishonesty facilitated by technology. This meme criticizes the presence of AI in education and its influence on education norms.

Students’ School Orientation

The meme below presents two contrasting situations for newcomer students during the same campus orientation day. The campus orientation program was known as OSPEK (an orientation to introduce campus life). This program aims to introduce new students to the campus

environment, academic systems, and the culture and ethics of higher education. The meme critiques these two different scenarios.

Figure 4: School Orientation Day



Figure 5: School Orientation Day



The language style carries significant meaning, with phrases like "This is OSPEK" and "This is ...?" in the second image. Readers are encouraged to analyze the two phenomena in the pictures through these phrases. "This is ...?" invites readers to critically reflect on the two situations. From a cultural perspective, the images highlight practices from two activities, aiming to introduce students to campus life. However, the second image portrays a group of students undergoing punishment, unlike the first image, which shows students engaged in a presentation. These critiques emphasize a disparity in how the same goal is achieved in different practices in education culture. Figure 4 on top describes an ideal academic environment activity in which students share their ideas within a group of 4 people in a presentation session. Unlike the previous image, the second image showed non-academic activity, more like cosplay, with the students covering their ears and wearing costumes. In a social context, this meme reflects the effectiveness of OSPEK and critiques stakeholders to take action and stop this kind of practice.

DISCUSSION

Critique of inappropriate use from the advancement of technology known as Artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT was analyzed. The researcher found that students' over-reliance on technology is the first theme of academic issues. A humorous tone was portrayed, yet the users (students) needed to use technology wisely. Overdependence on technology by students weakens academic integrity, such as creativity and other personal pedagogical abilities in learning (Hakim et al., 2024). Therefore, AI should be utilized wisely in education. Responsibility for the ethical use of technology such as ChatGPT is important. Academic integrity builds essential skills

such as creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving that AI cannot replace. From the visualization of the meme, textual analysis shows “My essay is due in 5 minutes,” and gratitude toward the presence of Ai “ChatGPT” emphasized “ChatGPT” as a savior to the academic pressure. The social and cultural context of the meme reflected trends in the use of AI in academic activities and professional settings. As a result of its trends, the need for a balanced and proper technology use toward technology integration is implicitly included in the meme. Addressing the ethical use of AI to hold academic integrity is everyone’s obligation. AI tools like ChatGPT can potentially enable people to specifically set plans and strategies for successful learning (Halaweh, 2023). As an active use of AI (illustrated from the meme), the students are very dependent on the use of AI. ChatGPT become a shortcut tool to academic pressure. Subject positioning portrayed as a student resulted in an over-reliance generation on technology during a study.

On the other hand, the second theme of the meme highlighted inappropriate practices during the orientation program for the new students. The memes portrayed satire and sarcasm toward the activities performed in the meme. A cultural tradition of a non-academic purpose from the first meme has been repeated. A critique is also subjected to stakeholders to reform the orientation program for new students. A sarcasm within the text “this is...?” showed critique to aim stakeholders to the chaotic and inappropriate activities performed in students’ orientation program. By contrasting two different orientation programs, the researcher underscored the ideological gap between institutional goals for academic preparation for students and cultural practice over the years. The orientation program is initiated to introduce a new student to the educational environment and goals to finish the study. Non-academic orientation programs resulted in unexpected academic goals, as illustrated in Figure 5. Moreover, inappropriate practice of orientation programs potentially impacts students’ psychology, such as trauma, fear, and low self-esteem (Putri et al., 2024). Hazing within student organizations has become a phenomenon over the years, and the need for an anti-hazing culture is also a crucial step to preventing a sustainable culture of violence in educational settings. Orientation programs can promote student character development in time management, responsibility, and teamwork (Restri et al., 2023). The Academic orientation program must include specific skills such as resiliency, well-being, and readiness for the academic environment (Hill et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The memes described through Sara Mills' approach combine several elements in critical discourse analysis from various perspectives, with the reader as the subject. The first meme collections demonstrated how a text and visualization of a meme showed critique of the

advancements of technology in learning. Students had misused a critique of the use of AI (ChatGPT). As a result, it made students dependent on technology. Moreover, academic pressure resulted in over-reliance on students' learning activities through technology. In conclusion, advancements in technology innovation have challenged academic integrity in the learning process. The intertextuality in the second meme is strongly emphasized in contrast activities. A humoristic language style contained sarcasm and satire. The element of sarcasm in the second meme indirectly conveys a clear tone regarding the ongoing activity of non-academic activity. It encouraged stakeholders to act immediately against inappropriate activity during campus orientation day.

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