

A Linguistic Framing of (De-)legitimization Strategies in Political Memefication

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Abstract—(De-)legitimization strategies in political memefication highlight the pivotal role of digital media in constructing and contesting political narratives. In recent years, the spread of misinformation, the growth of political polarization, and the rise of online activism have made memefication a significant force in contemporary political communication. This study investigates how political memes construct political discourse through (de-)legitimization strategies such as authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. Using qualitative content analysis, it examined political memes sourced from social media platforms. The findings reveal that memes utilize humour, satire, and intertextuality to reinforce or undermine political legitimacy. The findings also confirm that memefication in political discourse employs all four (de-)legitimization strategies, demonstrating their role in shaping public perceptions and influencing political narratives. Additionally, memes contribute to ideological biases, influence voter behaviour, and simplify complex political debates. This study contributes to linguistics by exploring how language, multimodal elements, and intertextuality in memes function as strategic tools of (de-)legitimization in political discourse. It offers valuable insights into how digital political communication reshapes discourse structures, ideological alignments, and persuasive strategies. For linguists, this study provides a framework for analyzing the intersection of discourse analysis, semiotics, and digital rhetoric in today's online political landscape. By highlighting the linguistic and semiotic mechanisms within memes, this research underscores the importance of media literacy in critically interpreting political narratives in digital spaces.

Index Terms—(de-)legitimization discourse, (de-)legitimization strategies, political discourse, memefication

I. INTRODUCTION

(De-)legitimization strategies in political memefication play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, influencing ideological positioning, and constructing political narratives (van Leeuwen, 2007). In the digital era, these strategies are increasingly manifested through memefication, where internet memes serve as tools to reinforce or challenge political legitimacy (Javed et al., 2022; Moreno-Almeida, 2021). The widespread adoption of meme culture, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, has enabled the strategic use of visual and textual narratives to either legitimize or delegitimize political actors and ideologies (Rezeki et al., 2024). In Indonesia, memes have become a powerful medium in shaping public perceptions of political candidates, policy decisions, and governance, often reflecting or reinforcing dominant political sentiments (Paz et al., 2021).

A growing body of research shows that meme-based political discourse increasingly employs humour, irony, and rhetorical questioning to frame political figures and issues (Fernández-Villanueva & Bayarri-Toscano, 2021; Zhang & Kang, 2024). These memes highlight shifts in power, political controversies, and scandals while engaging audiences in participatory discussions that reinforce or challenge prevailing political narratives. Despite their growing influence, memes remain an underexplored domain within critical discourse analysis, particularly regarding their role as instruments of (de-)legitimization (Fabrizzi, 2019). Political discourse studies have traditionally concentrated on formal communication forms such as speeches and news media, while informal, user-generated content like memes has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention within political communication research (Onielfa et al., 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

van Leeuwen (2007) identifies four primary (de-)legitimization strategies: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. While these strategies have been extensively examined in traditional political discourse,

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their application in the realm of memes remains largely unexplored. This study positions memes as digital political texts that construct, support, or challenge political legitimacy through strategic semiotic and discursive framing. It further situates memes within the broader phenomenon of memefication—the process through which original content (e.g., images, text, or videos) is transformed into memes that often diverge from their original contexts to convey specific sociopolitical meanings (Gal et al., 2016; Holm, 2021). This transformation underscores the dual role of memes: as humorous expressions and as powerful tools for political communication capable of supporting or challenging legitimacy.

Existing research on political memes has primarily focused on humour, virality, and memetic warfare (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013). Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) explored memes as part of participatory culture, emphasizing their social and political influence, while Penney (2020) examined how memes empower citizens through humour, solidarity, and accessible political critique. Mortensen and Neumayer (2021) analyzed memes as tools for political engagement, capable of reinforcing or challenging political power. Fei et al. (2021) highlighted memes as vehicles for political discussion, propaganda, and activism. Halversen and Weeks (2023) further demonstrated how memes facilitate political expression by mocking political figures, persuading audiences, and informing public discourse.

While these studies provide valuable insights into digital discourse, they often fall short in capturing the specific impact of memes as complex multimodal texts. Foundational work in digital discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) and multimodal communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; van Leeuwen, 2007) underscores the dynamic interplay between textual and visual elements in meaning-making. However, these theoretical perspectives have rarely been extended to the study of memes—especially in relation to (de-)legitimization in political contexts. This oversight has resulted in several key gaps in the literature. First, much of the existing research tends to prioritize the visual aspects of memes, often overlooking the linguistic strategies that play a crucial role in shaping ideological meanings. Second, although van Leeuwen's (2007) model of (de-)legitimation has been widely applied to analyze speeches and traditional media texts, its application to memes remains limited. Third, the role of memes in constructing or challenging political legitimacy within digital discourse remains insufficiently explored. Addressing these gaps is crucial for advancing a more comprehensive understanding of how political meaning is negotiated through multimodal forms in online spaces.

This study addresses these gaps by employing van Leeuwen's (2007) framework to conduct a discourse analysis of political memes, focusing on how strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis operate within meme texts. It aims to uncover how memes strategically (de-)legitimize political actors and ideologies and to examine how these rhetorical and linguistic strategies shape public narratives. By analyzing memes as dynamic instruments of political discourse, this research contributes both to the field of discourse studies and the broader domain of political communication.

The findings of this study offer significant contributions to linguistics and digital discourse analysis by revealing how memes function as powerful rhetorical tools. This study enhances understanding of (de-)legitimization in digital political discourse by examining linguistic strategies such as irony, metaphor, and rhetorical framing. Furthermore, it expands the scope of multimodal linguistics by illustrating how text and visual elements in memes interact to construct meaning. In the realm of digital sociolinguistics, it highlights the influence of political ideology and cultural context on linguistic choices and stylistic variations in memes. These insights also have implications for media and communication studies, offering media practitioners and analysts a deeper grasp of how memes frame political issues and shape public sentiment.

Based on this background, this study investigates how (de-)legitimization strategies are employed in memefication of political discourse to construct or challenge political legitimacy. By focusing on these strategies in the context of memefication, this study provides a deeper understanding of the role of internet memes in political discourse and their impact on shaping public perceptions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. (De-)legitimization Discourse

The term (de-)legitimization derives from the combination of legitimacy and delegitimization, representing the dynamic process through which authority, policies, or actions are justified or contested within a given social context (Rezeki et al., 2024; Rizwan, 2019; Stappert et al., 2025). Legitimization refers to the discursive process through which authority, policies, or actions are justified as acceptable and valid in a social context (Saveleva, 2019; Vaara et al., 2024). Conversely, delegitimization undermines, questions, or discredits authority or legitimacy (Baritono, 2020; Ristić, 2015). These strategies are often employed in digital political discourse to shape public perceptions of political figures, institutions, or movements (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013).

In digital contexts, (de-)legitimization discourse is amplified through the rapid dissemination and virality of content on social media platforms. Political actors, influencers, and ordinary users alike can contribute to legitimizing or delegitimizing narratives by creating, sharing, or commenting on content that aligns with their ideological positions. This participatory nature of digital discourse enables the construction of collective meanings and identities, often intensifying polarization in public opinion. Moreover, the use of visual discourse such as memes, infographics, or edited videos further amplifies the persuasive power of (de-)legitimization strategies, making them more accessible and emotionally resonant for diverse audiences.

B. (De-)legitimization Discourse Strategies

van Leeuwen (2007) identifies four primary discourse strategies of (de-)legitimization, including authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. While these strategies have traditionally been examined in formal political discourse (e.g., speeches, policy documents, and news media), they are increasingly evident in digital discourse like political memes. Through the combination of textual and visual elements, memes employ these strategies to construct or challenge legitimacy, reinforce ideological positions, and influence public perception.

Authorization is among the most prevalent (de-)legitimization strategies, where authority is drawn from institutions, laws, experts, or tradition. In memes, authorization frequently appears through references to constitutional frameworks, government decisions, legal documents, or authoritative endorsements. These references work to bolster the credibility of political leaders or institutions, often portraying them as legitimate sources of power and governance (Rezeki et al., 2024). Conversely, memes may undermine such legitimacy by questioning institutional credibility, exposing contradictions, or satirizing authoritative claims (Galipeau, 2022). For example, memes critiquing inconsistent legal rulings or mocking political endorsements serve to delegitimize the actors involved (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Moral Evaluation legitimizes or delegitimizes actors and actions based on shared ethical values, cultural norms, and societal ideals. In digital meme discourse, this is commonly observed in portrayals of political figures as virtuous leaders or moral failures. Memes may exalt certain individuals as heroes, saviors, or champions of the people while simultaneously condemning their opponents for perceived corruption, hypocrisy, or moral incompetence. This strategic framing reinforces ideological boundaries and polarizes public opinion through in-group/out-group constructions (van Dijk, 2006; Zeb et al., 2025). For instance, memes accusing public officials of moral betrayal or highlighting scandals serve to delegitimize their authority by appealing to collective moral standards (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Rationalization involves the use of logic, reason, or empirical evidence to justify or critique authority. In political memes, this is achieved through the strategic deployment of statistics, polling data, economic indicators, or “common sense” narratives. For instance, memes may reference public opinion polls to validate popular support for a politician or cite budget figures to critique a policy decision. However, this strategy also opens the door to misinformation, as some memes manipulate or oversimplify data to promote ideological agendas (Galipeau, 2022; Rezeki et al., 2024). Rationalization thus becomes a tool not only for persuasion but also for ideological manipulation, framed within the meme’s concise and visual format (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Mythopoesis constructs or contests legitimacy through storytelling and narrative framing. This strategy embeds ideological messages within familiar cultural myths, historical analogies, or moral tales that render political claims emotionally resonant and symbolically powerful. Memes utilizing mythopoesis may portray political figures as modern-day heroes or martyrs, invoking nationalist symbols or referencing legendary leaders to legitimize their role. Conversely, adversaries may be represented as villains, threats, or historical regressions (Shifman, 2013; Rezeki et al., 2025). For example, a meme comparing a contemporary leader to a revered national hero functions to naturalize their political role and inspire trust through emotional identification (van Leeuwen, 2007).

C. Political Discourse

Political discourse refers to the strategic use of language to discuss, construct, and influence political realities. It encompasses both formal and informal modes of communication, including speeches, parliamentary debates, media coverage, and everyday conversations across various platforms (Andrushko, 2021; Contesa & Surwandono, 2024). In the digital age, political discourse has expanded beyond traditional media to include interactive and participatory spaces such as social media. Within this landscape, user-generated content, particularly political memes, has emerged as a powerful force in shaping public opinion, reinforcing ideological positions, and framing political narratives (AlAfnan, 2025; Haqqi et al., 2022). As a reflection of power relations, ideological struggles, and dominant social values, political discourse is a central focus in both political communication and critical discourse analysis (Teodorescu, 2018). Studying how political language operates in digital environments is therefore essential to understanding how meaning, influence, and authority are negotiated in contemporary society.

D. Memefication

Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) and Moussa et al. (2020) argue that memes serve as a form of participatory communication, allowing the spread of political opinions through humour, sarcasm, or social critique. Based on this idea, Holm (2021) introduces the term “memefication” to describe the adaptation and modification of visual and verbal content to reshape its original meaning in line with specific social and cultural interests. This phenomenon is increasingly relevant in Indonesian politics, where memes are often used to shape public opinion, either by supporting or challenging particular political discourses.

Political memes have thus become a crucial mode of digital discourse, blending humour, satire, and ideology to shape audience perspectives (Gal et al., 2016; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). Within this context, meme captions play a pivotal role as textual elements that establish context, reinforce narratives, and frame political actors (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). They function as discourse markers, guiding the interpretation of visual content while drawing upon shared social knowledge to enhance resonance (Akhther, 2021).

III. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative approach within a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to examine how memefication employs (de-)legitimization strategies in political discourse. The research was guided by van Leeuwen's (2007) model of (de-)legitimization and multimodal discourse analysis (van Leeuwen, 2007), enabling a nuanced exploration of how political meanings were constructed and challenged through memes. An exploratory research design was employed to uncover linguistic and semiotic mechanisms used in memes to frame political narratives.

The primary data source comprised political memefication collected from Instagram, selected for their high engagement and frequent use of political satire. The data were collected during the Indonesia's 2024 election campaign, a period marked by a significant increase in political meme production targeting public figures, political parties, and key electoral issues. The increased presence of political memefication during this time reflected heightened political engagement and strategic use of memes in shaping political discourse.

This study employed content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) to systematically analyze textual and visual elements. The data collection involved two types of data. The primary data consisted of political memes widely circulated across social media platforms, and the secondary data comprised scholarly literature on (de-)legitimization strategies, multimodal discourse analysis, and digital political communication, which provided the theoretical foundation for interpreting the findings. The data collection methods included manual compilation (e.g., capturing screenshots and archiving memes), metadata extraction (recording engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments), and thematic categorization based on (de-)legitimization strategies including authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis.

This analysis identified two main types of memefication: (1) Image-text modified memefication, which altered both the visual and textual elements—such as replacing faces and modifying text—to construct new political narratives; (2) Text-added memefication, in which the original image remains unchanged, but additional text was inserted to reframe the content and create a (de-)legitimizing effect. This type often carried sarcastic, humorous, or critical commentary on political subjects.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

(a). Authorization (De-)legitimization Strategy

The authorization (de-)legitimization strategy in memefication draws on authoritative figures and symbols to either reinforce or challenge political legitimacy.

Data 1: Memefication of Mega and the Lost Ketum Parpol

The original image in Figure 1 is a movie poster from *Dora and the Lost City of Gold*, featuring the main character, Dora, holding a torch in the middle of a jungle and surrounded by her friends in an adventurous setting. The film centers on themes of exploration and the pursuit of something valuable. Through the memefication process, the poster was transformed into *Mega and the Lost Ketum Parpol* (Mega and the Lost Leader of a Political Party). Dora was replaced by Megawati Soekarnoputri, the former leader of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), who is depicted holding a torch as a symbol of leadership and authority. The supporting characters in the poster were replaced with prominent PDI-P political figures, including Puan Maharani and Hasto Kristiyanto, illustrating the party's internal political dynamics. This recontextualization shifts the narrative from an adventure story to a political satire about Megawati's leadership amidst debates over succession and leadership regeneration within the PDI-P.



Figure 1. Image-Text Modified Memefication (Instagram @pinterpolitik, March 25, 2024)

The meme reconfigures the *Dora and the Lost City of Gold* poster, transforming the theme of an adventurous treasure hunt into a metaphorical search for political leadership within PDI-P. The torch held by Megawati in the center of the image becomes a visual representation of power, continuity, and control—reinforcing her dominant role in the party's leadership discourse following the 2024 general elections. Drawing on van Leeuwen's (2007) authorization strategy, the

meme simultaneously legitimizes and critiques political authority by placing an established figure at the center of the narrative. Megawati's central position, coupled with strong symbolic imagery such as the torch, underscores her continued relevance and influence within the party's leadership structure.

Data 2: Memefication of Ridwan Kamil

The original image in Figure 2 is a movie poster for *Shazam! La Rage des Dieux*, featuring the superhero Shazam in a striking red costume with a lightning bolt emblem on his chest and a flowing white cape, symbolizing strength and heroism. Through the memefication process, Shazam's face was replaced with that of Ridwan Kamil (RK), and additional text was inserted, such as "*Didukung Projo Joss Gandos*" (Supported by Projo, Absolutely Great!), linking RK to political support from the Projo volunteer group and the Gerindra Party. Shazam's superhero imagery in the meme constructs a narrative that frames RK as a "political hero" with strong backing, thereby reinforcing his legitimacy through the use of van Leeuwen's (2007) authorization strategy.



Figure 2. Image-Text Modified Memefication (Instagram @pinterpolitik, June 11, 2024)

The meme recontextualizes the movie poster by framing Ridwan Kamil as a political hero supported by major organizations like Projo and Gerindra. Emerging within the context of regional election candidacies, the meme reflects the increasing importance of political endorsements from both volunteer networks and formal party structures as key instruments of legitimacy. According to van Leeuwen's (2007) theoretical framework, the meme clearly utilizes the authorization strategy through multiple discursive layers. Firstly, RK is a candidate supported by Projo and the Gerindra Party. Secondly, imperative statements such as "*Pokoknya Kang Ridwan Kamil lah!*" (*It has to be Ridwan Kamil!*) assert unconditional support, functioning as rhetorical tools to assert social consensus and urgency. Thirdly, the reference to legal procedures through the statement "*Gerindra sudah keluarkan surat rekomendasi RK maju di Jakarta*" (*Gerindra has issued a recommendation letter for RK to run in Jakarta*), links his candidacy to formal political processes. Finally, the inclusion of direct quotes from public figures like Budi Arie enhances the credibility of the narrative, aligning RK's image with influential political voices. Visually, elements such as the superhero costume, lightning bolt, cape, and Projo logo amplify RK's constructed persona as a powerful, morally guided leader destined to "save" or "transform" the political landscape. These semiotic resources are not mere embellishments; rather, they function collectively to (re-)produce legitimacy and authority in the public eye.

(b). *Moral Evaluation (De-)legitimization Strategy*

The moral evaluation (de-)legitimization strategy in memefication frames political actors or policies within a moral dichotomy of right and wrong.

Data 3: Memefication of House of Lies

The original image in Figure 3 is a promotional poster for the TV series *House of Cards*, featuring the main character seated on a throne-like chair with blood-stained hands, symbolizing political intrigue, manipulation, and the ruthless pursuit of power. In the memefied version, the character's face was replaced with that of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) during his presidency, and the title is altered to *House of Lies*. This transformation shifts the meaning from fictional political drama into a pointed political critique, accusing Jokowi's administration engaged in deception and strategic manipulation. By modifying both visual and textual elements, the meme repurposes the original connotations of corruption and power abuse into a commentary aimed at delegitimizing real-world political leadership.



Figure 3. Image-Text Modified Memefication (Instagram @pinterpolitik, February 13, 2024)

The meme recontextualizes the *House of Cards* poster to deliver a direct critique of Jokowi’s administration, particularly regarding democratic backsliding, political dynasties, and controversial policies. Through the strategy of moral evaluation, the meme employs evaluative language, such as “deception” and “lies”, to frame the administration as morally deficient, constructing a narrative of dishonesty and manipulation. It constructs a contrast between normative ideals of governance based on transparency, integrity, and public accountability, and the perceived reality of leadership marked by duplicity and self-interest. The rhetorical transformation is reinforced by explicit textual markers such as *House of Lies* and *A Deception Government of Jokowi*, which not only undermine the legitimacy of Jokowi’s leadership but also evoke a broader sense of betrayal felt by the public. Additionally, visual symbols play a crucial role in strengthening this discourse, with the seat of power emphasizing authority and the red text evoking a sense of threat, moral danger, and urgency. Together, these visual and textual elements work synergistically to frame Jokowi not as a democratic leader, but as a figure enmeshed in political deceit.

Data 4: Memefication of *Filosofi Es Teh*

The original image in Figure 4 is a poster from the Indonesian film *Filosofi Kopi* (Philosophy of Coffee), featuring the main characters (Chicco Jericho, Rio Dewanto, and Julie Estelle) set against a background that highlights the theme of coffee. The film explores themes of philosophy, friendship, and perseverance within coffee, visually depicted through a cafe atmosphere with warm and artistic tones. In the meme adaptation, this poster is reimagined through irony and social critique by replacing the central symbol of coffee with iced tea, a deliberate shift that reframes the narrative to reflect everyday realities. This transformation arose in response to a public controversy sparked by a statement perceived as demeaning to iced tea vendors, triggering broader discussions about the value and dignity of modest professions.



Figure 4. Image-Text Modified Memefication (Instagram @pinterpolitik, December 5, 2024)

The meme employs a moral evaluation strategy by incorporating various discourse elements that critique elitist views on small-scale professions. Through evaluative language, the phrase “*Jangan hina profesi dan es teh*” (*Do not insult the profession and iced tea*) explicitly condemns belittling modest occupations. This direct appeal constructs a clear moral stance, positioning the meme as a defense of everyday labor against hierarchical and exclusionary views on professional worth. The juxtaposition of two central figures further reinforces this evaluative framework. Gibran is depicted holding a glass of iced tea, symbolizing solidarity with ordinary workers and a rejection of class-based discrimination. In contrast, Miftah’s critical posture within the meme represents elitist condescension, heightening the ideological tension between respect for labor and societal prestige. This moral polarity prompts viewers to question social hierarchies and the legitimacy of belittling professions commonly perceived as low-status. Moreover, the symbolic replacement of coffee—often associated with intellectualism, sophistication, and artisanal culture—with iced tea—a widely accessible, everyday beverage—functions as a potent semiotic reversal. It challenges dominant cultural narratives that equate value with prestige, emphasizing instead the virtues of simplicity, honesty, and hard work. In this context, iced tea becomes an

emblem of underappreciated labor, reclaiming moral legitimacy for marginalized professions. Through this layered approach, the meme mobilizes moral rhetoric not only to critique specific individuals or remarks but also to provoke broader societal reflection. It transforms a popular cultural reference into a sharp instrument of discourse (de-)legitimization, reinforcing alternative value systems that elevate respect, humility, and social equity. Ultimately, the meme exemplifies how digital satire, when strategically framed, can serve as a powerful vehicle for social commentary and moral discourse within contemporary political and cultural conversations.

(c). *Rationalization (De-)legitimization Strategy*

The rationalization (de-)legitimization strategy in memefication justifies or challenges political actions through logical reasoning and cause-effect framing.

Data 5: Memefication of Anies Sandi

The original image in Figure 5 features Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno dressed in formal attire (white shirts and black cap), standing against a bold red background, accompanied by the congratulatory message: “Congratulations on the Inauguration of Anies-Sandi as Governor and Deputy Governor of Jakarta for the 2017–2022 period”. This visual composition clearly serves to affirm their political legitimacy, underscoring their formal induction into public office and symbolizing institutional endorsement, competence, and leadership success during their term in Jakarta.



Figure 5. Text-Added Memefication (Instagram @komik_pingiran, September 7, 2024)

The meme recontextualizes the original image to generate a new layer of political discourse, utilizing a rationalization strategy to construct legitimacy. By posing the provocative question, “*Gimana kalo Anies-Sandi bikin partai?*” (What if Anies-Sandi formed a political party?), the meme shifts attention from their previous administrative role to speculative political futures. The rhetorical device, “What if...?”, functions not merely as a hypothetical device but as a discursive tool that subtly argues that past performance warrants future leadership at the national level. The visual elements, including a crowd of supporters waving flags featuring their portraits, highlight the impression of strong grassroots support, aligning with the growing political speculation surrounding the duo post-leadership. The rationalization strategy is evident through an implicit cause-and-effect structure: their successful governance of Jakarta justifies their moral legitimacy and capacity to establish a new political party. These visual and textual cues strengthen the link between past accomplishments and envisioned trajectories, rendering the meme not merely hypothetical but a persuasive proposition. It exemplifies rationalization as a legitimizing discourse within broader dynamics of political (de-)legitimization.

Data 6: Memefication of The Invitation Game

The original image in Figure 6 is a poster for *The Imitation Game*, featuring Benedict Cumberbatch as Alan Turing, a brilliant mathematician during World War II. The film revolves around Turing’s efforts to break the German Enigma code, a critical achievement that contributed to the Allies’ victory. The poster foregrounds themes of intelligence, complexity, and individual resilience in the face of overwhelming odds. The presence of the Enigma machine in the background underscores the high-stakes nature of Turing’s mission and reinforces the atmosphere of secrecy, logic, and strategic brilliance.



Figure 6. Image-Text Modified Memefication (Instagram @dupicturescom, July 8, 2024)

The meme modifies the original film poster by replacing Turing's face with that of Joko Widodo (Jokowi), thereby drawing an analogy between Turing's intellectual feats and Jokowi's political maneuvers. This memefied version emerged amid discussions of Jokowi's strategic alliance-building, particularly his meeting with Surya Paloh, which sparked public interpretation as a deliberate attempt to consolidate post-presidential influence. Using *The Imitation Game*'s visual and thematic elements, the meme suggests that Jokowi's actions are part of a larger, well-planned strategy. The rationalization strategy is evident through an implicit cause-and-effect structure: Jokowi's decision to meet with Surya Paloh and strengthen political alliances leads to the perception that he is successfully positioning himself ahead of his rivals. Through this transformation, the meme employs a rationalization-based (de-)legitimization strategy, crafting an objective argument while reinforcing Jokowi's image as a highly strategic and calculated leader.

(d). *Mythopoesis (De-)legitimization Strategy*

The mythopoesis (de-)legitimization strategy in memefication constructs political figures or events within legendary or heroic narratives to reinforce or challenge their legitimacy.

Data 7: Memefication of The Rise of Eko Patrio

The original image in Figure 7 features Superman in a heroic pose, soaring through the sky with his right hand raised, wearing his iconic blue-and-red costume with the unmistakable "S" emblem on his chest. The background of a bright blue sky scattered with clouds amplifies an epic and courageous impression. In popular culture, Superman is widely recognized as a symbol of strength, heroism, and salvation. In the memefied version, Superman's face is replaced with that of Eko Patrio, implying that his appointment as Secretary-General of the National Mandate Party (PAN) is associated with heroism and significant transformation. This meme emerged in the context of Eko Patrio's official appointment by Zulkifli Hasan, which is visually constructed as a "rise" through the reference to a well-known heroic figure.



Figure 7. Image-Text Modified Memefication (Instagram @pinterpolitik, October 1, 2024)

This meme employs the strategy of mythopoesis in the legitimization of political discourse by embedding Eko Patrio within a mythic narrative. The mythopoetic elements are evident through various elements reinforcing his portrayal as a heroic figure. First, the historical and symbolic narrative repurposes Superman as a saviour and moral figure, now associated with Eko Patrio, to elevate his political image. Second, the use of figurative language in the phrase "The Rise of Eko Patrio" underscores his emergence and transformation into a significant political figure. Third, the meme leverages a cultural reference by drawing upon Superman, a globally recognized icon of power and leadership, to reinforce Eko Patrio's perceived strength and capability. Finally, the visual elements play a crucial role, as Superman's colours and iconic costumes are strategically repurposed to establish a heroic image. This analysis demonstrates that the meme is not merely a humorous creation but a powerful political communication tool, utilizing popular myths to shape public perception effectively.

Data 8: Memefication of *The Toxic King*

The original image in Figure 8 is the promotional poster for the 2019 film *Joker*, featuring the character Arthur Fleck—portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix—dressed in a red suit with a yellow vest, captured in a dramatic pose against a gritty urban setting. The film portrays Arthur's transformation into the Joker, symbolizing chaos and resistance against an unjust social system. The meme modifies this poster by replacing the character with the public figure Miftah, associating the controversial and anarchic nature of the Joker with the intended negative portrayal of Miftah. This meme emerged in the context of social or political criticism, utilizing the Joker's imagery to highlight Miftah's controversial nature and perceived negative influence.

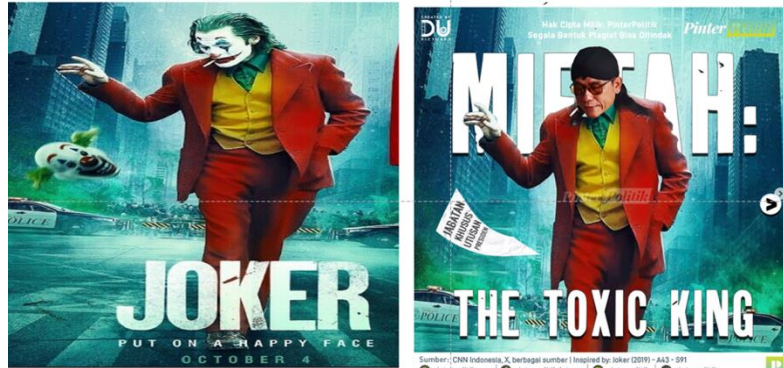


Figure 8. Image-Text Modified Memefication (Instagram @pinterpolitik, December 6, 2024)

The meme employs the strategy of mythopoesis in the (de-)legitimization of political discourse by leveraging symbolic representation. The Joker, widely recognized as an icon of chaos and resistance against the system, is strategically linked to Miftah, constructing an image of disruption and defiance. The use of figurative language, particularly the phrase “The Toxic King”, reinforces Miftah’s association with harmful or destructive traits, amplifying the delegitimizing effect. By utilizing a well-known movie poster, the meme capitalizes on popular cultural references, ensuring immediate public recognition and engagement and enhancing its critique’s impact. The visual transformation (retaining key elements of the Joker's pose and attire while replacing his face with Miftah's) effectively recontextualizes the original narrative into a pointed political statement. As a result, this meme is not merely a subjective critique but a structured application of mythopoetic strategy, shaping public perception through symbolic and visual discourse.

B. Discussion

This study underscores how political memes operate as strategic instruments of (de-)legitimization within digital discourse. Employing van Leeuwen's (2007) typology—authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis—this research demonstrates how memes in Indonesian digital spaces construct, reinforce, or challenge political legitimacy. Rather than serving as mere entertainment, memes function as rhetorical devices capable of shaping public perceptions of political actors, institutions, and events, aligning with the growing scholarly consensus on the persuasive potential of digital humor (Wiggins, 2019; Milner, 2016).

Our findings reveal that authorization is a dominant strategy used to enhance the credibility of political figures by associating them with institutions, symbols, or historically revered figures, echoing van Leeuwen's (2007) assertion that legitimacy is often derived from perceived authority. Rationalization and moral evaluation frequently underpin memes that challenge or delegitimize opponents by questioning their logic, coherence, or ethical stance—similar to the findings of Ross and Rivers (2018), who noted that memes often serve as tools of critique and resistance. Meanwhile, mythopoesis plays a vital role in embedding ideological messages into simplified narratives or metaphors, reflecting Barthes' (1972) idea of myth as a mode of cultural storytelling that naturalizes political ideologies.

The results demonstrate that memes are inherently multimodal texts where visual and verbal elements work together to establish persuasive discourses. The study found that humour, satire, and irony are dominant stylistic devices that enhance the memorability and appeal of political memes. Similar to Nissenbaum and Shifman's (2017) emphasis on memes as participatory culture, our study finds that memes often employ intertextuality—referencing cultural events, historical moments, or popular media—to shape political narratives and resonate with diverse audiences.

A significant contribution of this study is its emphasis on memes' speed and virality, which enable the swift dissemination of political messages across decentralized platforms. Unlike traditional media constrained by editorial oversight, meme culture facilitates bottom-up engagement in political discourse, a trend explored by Highfield (2016), who described memes as grassroots tools for everyday political expression. This rapid circulation and participatory nature democratize legitimacy-building and critique, allowing ordinary users to actively partake in political meaning-making.

Previous research has primarily explored political memes through the lenses of humor, activism, or memetic warfare (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013; Milner, 2016). While acknowledging these facets, this study advances the field by applying van Leeuwen's (2007) discursive framework to provide a systematic analysis of (de-)legitimization strategies. Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) recognized the cultural power of memes, yet our research extends their approach by

analyzing the specific rhetorical mechanisms that construct political authority and challenge it. Similarly, Fei et al. (2021) emphasized the use of memes in activism and propaganda; we build on this by offering a granular examination of the discursive techniques—authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis—underlying such strategies.

Moreover, Halversen and Weeks (2023) argued that memes function to mock, persuade, and inform, but did not detail how such effects are discursively constructed. Our study fills this gap by offering a more nuanced discourse-analytical approach, identifying the ideological underpinnings that inform meme narratives. By doing so, we extend their communicative analysis into a rhetorical framework rooted in critical discourse studies. In sum, while earlier studies addressed memes from cultural, sociological, or participatory standpoints, our research offers a structured linguistic framework to analyze how political legitimacy is discursively shaped in digital contexts.

This study's contribution lies in bridging discourse analysis with digital media studies. Theoretically, it integrates van Leeuwen's (2007) framework with multimodal digital discourse analysis, offering a coherent methodology for studying political memes. Methodologically, it validates the use of qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) for decoding how visual and textual elements interact to convey legitimacy. Practically, it provides insights for journalists, political actors, and educators on how memes function not just as viral content but as strategic political rhetoric influencing opinion, engagement, and potentially voting behavior.

Nevertheless, this study presents several limitations. Focusing primarily on Indonesian political memes, its findings may not readily generalize across cultural or political contexts. Comparative cross-cultural studies are needed to examine how (de-)legitimization strategies vary across meme cultures. Additionally, while this study decodes meaning construction, it does not assess audience reception, which is critical in understanding meme impact. Future research could adopt ethnographic or reception-based methods to explore how users interpret politically charged memes in light of their affiliations and identities. Lastly, the lack of a quantitative component limits measurement of memes' actual influence. Future studies could employ sentiment analysis, engagement metrics, or network analysis to assess reach and impact, thereby enriching our understanding of digital (de-)legitimization processes.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that political memes are not merely humorous or entertaining artifacts; rather, they serve as strategic tools of political communication. The analysis identified four main (de-)legitimization strategies: (i) authorization, where legitimacy is grounded in references to authority figures or institutions; (ii) moral evaluation, which positions political actors or events within ethical frames; (iii) rationalization, offering logical or utilitarian justifications; and (iv) mythopoesis, which constructs political meaning through narrative storytelling. These strategies show that memes both reflect and shape political realities by influencing how the public perceives and engages with political issues.

These findings have significant implications for understanding contemporary digital political communication. Memes increasingly function as vehicles for political persuasion, agenda-setting, and discourse framing. As digital media ecosystems continue to evolve, the role of memes in shaping political narratives is likely to grow, underscoring the need for policymakers, media practitioners, and political communicators to acknowledge and respond to their influence.

Multiple stakeholders can benefit from this research. Political analysts and scholars can use these findings to deepen their understanding of multimodal political discourse in digital contexts. Journalists and media professionals may apply these findings to critically assess the role of memes in shaping public perception. Educators and students engaged in the study of digital culture, political communication, and discourse analysis can benefit from the study's methodological approach. Furthermore, policymakers and digital regulators may use these findings to develop informed strategies for managing political discourse in online spaces.

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