



Audience-Generated Political Memes in TikTok Comment Sections: A Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis of Kompas TV's TikTok Account

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ABSTRACT

This study examines audience-generated memes in the TikTok comment section as a form of audience participation in digital political communication, focusing on content related to Bahlil Lahadalia on the Kompas TV account. Using a qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, this research examines ten memes purposively selected from 26 identified meme-based comments in the comment section. Using a qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, this research examines ten memes purposively selected from 26 identified meme-based comments in the comment section. The analysis focuses on denotation, connotation, and myth to examine how audiences construct political meanings through satire, direct criticism, humor, and sarcasm. The findings show that audiences use memes through four communication forms, political satire, direct criticism, humor, and sarcasm, to express political evaluation and criticism of public figures. Political satire uses irony and cultural references to question political images, direct criticism conveys explicit responses to political issues and public policies, humor transforms political criticism into accessible and entertaining expressions, while sarcasm conveys sharper criticism through indirect and ironic representations. At the myth level, memes reveal broader cultural meanings, including the normalization of audience participation in shaping public images, the contestation of dominant political narratives, and the use of popular culture and internet language as shared symbolic resources. This study highlights memes as an active form of audience participation in constructing political discourse in digital spaces.

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1. Introduction

The development of social media has given birth to various new forms in digital communication practices, one of which is memes. In digital culture, memes are not only understood as entertainment content, but also as a multimodal form of communication that combines visual, text, and humor elements to convey a specific message. Meme is widely used by social media users to express opinions, build group identities, convey social criticism, and respond to political issues that are developing in the digital public space. These characteristics make memes an important form of communication in public interaction on social media (Bülow & Johann, 2023).



Shifman (2013) explains that digital memes are groups of content that share common characteristics and are disseminated, imitated, and modified by internet users through various digital platforms. In their development, memes have become part of a digital participatory culture that allows users to act not only as consumers of information, but also as producers and distributors of messages (De la Rosa-Carrillo, 2015).

In the political context, memes are often used as a means of public expression of political figures and policies. Through a combination of visual, text, and humorous elements, memes allow users to convey criticism, satirism, or political views in a more interesting and easily disseminated way through social media (Andriani, 2019). One of the most prominent forms of meme development can be seen in the political realm, where memes serve not only as entertainment, but also as a medium of communication and the delivery of public opinion (Hasanah et al., 2025).

Memes here can be said to be included in the form of one's art and creativity or can be done collectively that has an expressive communication function. Tenove (2019) explain that political memes can evoke emotional involvement toward particular groups and construct normative statements about political figures and issues under specific political conditions. Political memes may take the form of jokes while also eliciting emotional responses, ranging from humor to more confrontational forms of expression.

The appearance of memes is often triggered by specific events, statements by public figures, or content that attracts public attention. Memes can appear not only as primary content but also as audience responses in comment sections, particularly in discussions of political news (Suryana et al., 2023). In the context of political communication on social media, memes can function as a medium for expressing social and political criticism Wahjono et al. (2025) and as a form of digital political participation through which audiences respond to political issues and public figures in creative and symbolic ways.

Among these platforms, TikTok, which initially gained popularity as an entertainment-oriented platform, has increasingly become a space for discussion, opinion expression, and political communication (Hasanah et al., 2025). Through its interactive features, including video, photo, and comment functions, TikTok enables users to communicate through both textual and visual forms and to actively participate in digital communication processes (Turvy, 2025). In this context, the comment section serves as an important space for users to respond to media content and engage in the formation of shared meanings regarding social issues and public figures (Ismail et al., 2023).

Kompas TV is one of the media accounts that shares political content on TikTok (Sallaku et al., 2025). Its uploads discussing public figures such as Bahlil Lahadalia have generated audience responses in the form of image-based memes. This study focuses on TikTok content related to Bahlil Lahadalia published by Kompas TV between October and November 2025. These audience-generated memes are significant because they provide visual responses through which audiences interpret, evaluate, and construct meanings about public figures and political issues.

Previous studies have established that political memes function as visual and symbolic forms of political communication. Research has examined how memes represent political figures, communicate public opinion, and express criticism through satire, cultural symbols, and digital humor (Andriani, 2019; Fatanti & Prabawangi, 2021; Kurniawan & Pd, 2024; Marlina & Hakim, 2025). Recent research has further examined the role of memes in shaping political discourse on social media, particularly their relationship with public opinion, political participation, engagement, and ideological polarization (AlAfnan, 2025). While these studies demonstrate the political functions and broader effects of memes, they primarily examine memes as content that is created, circulated, and engaged with across social media platforms.

They therefore provide limited insight into memes produced directly by audiences as responses within comment sections, particularly in terms of how their visual and textual elements construct political meanings. Studies on political communication on social media also show that TikTok comment sections provide spaces for audiences to express disagreement, ideological positions, and interpretations of political content. For example, a recent study of political interactions on TikTok examined 50 text-based comments using Culpeper's impoliteness framework and found that comments functioned as pragmatic resources for expressing disagreement and asserting ideological positions (Jeon, 2024). Similarly, other studies have examined audience responses through textual comments or symbolic interaction (Alfi & Zulita, 2025; Dasfy et al., 2025; Konijn, 2024). However, these studies primarily focus on textual forms of audience response, leaving audience-generated memes as visual responses relatively underexplored.

This gap is important because image-based comments combine visual signs, textual elements, and cultural references, which may produce meanings that cannot be fully understood through the analysis of textual responses alone. Therefore, this study positions audience-generated memes not merely as responses to political content, but as visual forms of political participation through which audiences construct representations and meanings of public figures. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine memes as content produced and circulated by social media creators, this study focuses on memes spontaneously produced by audiences within the TikTok comment section.

The study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which conceptualizes meaning through denotation, connotation, and myth (Moriarty, 2019; Puri et al., 2024). Denotation refers to the literal or explicit meaning of signs, while connotation concerns the associated meanings shaped by cultural and social contexts. Myth refers to broader cultural meanings and ideological assumptions that become naturalized through signs. This framework enables the study to examine how the combination of visual and textual signs in audience-generated memes constructs representations and political meanings of public figures.

Empirically, this study contributes to understanding audience-generated memes as visual forms of political participation in TikTok comment sections, while theoretically, it demonstrates how Barthes' semiotic framework can be applied to examine the construction of political meaning through the combination of visual and textual signs. Accordingly, this study examines audience-generated political memes in the TikTok comment sections of Kompas TV as a form of visual political response. The research question is: How do audience-generated political memes in the TikTok comment sections of Kompas TV construct political meanings through denotation, connotation, and myth?

2. Method

The method used is qualitative with a semiotic approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on understanding social phenomena in depth in a natural context (Zuchri, 2021). Meanwhile, the semiotics approach is used to analyze the relationship between signs, the objects they represent, and the meanings constructed through audience interpretation (Barthes, 1988). Through this approach, memes are understood as a system of signs that represent political criticism and the construction of social meaning.

The data consist of audience-generated political memes that appear in the comment sections of TikTok videos posted by the Kompas TV account (@kompastv.indonesia) concerning public figure Bahlil Lahadalia. The research focused on relevant uploads published between October and November 2025. The unit of analysis is the visual signs, text, and symbols contained in the memes, with analytical aspects including the expression of opinions, criticism, satire, and the audience's

symbolic response to political content (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). In this study, memes refer to audience-generated image-based comments that combine visual and/or textual elements to communicate a humorous, critical, satirical, or sarcastic response to the political content. Reaction images or visual comments without a communicative connection to the political content were not included as data.

This study places Kompas TV's TikTok account as the context of a digital communication space where the audience produces and distributes memes in the comment column, not as the main object of analysis. Thus, the focus of the research remains on memes as the audience's visual response to the political content presented.

The location of the research is in the digital space, namely the TikTok platform, especially on the @kompastv.indonesia account. Data was collected through documentation techniques by taking screenshots of memes that appeared in the comment column, as well as non-participant observations of audience interactions on related uploads. During the data collection period, 19 TikTok uploads related to Bahlil Lahadalia published by the @kompastv.indonesia account between October and November 2025 were observed. Of these uploads, 10 contained image-based meme comments.

The data selection technique uses purposive sampling, which is the selection of memes based on certain criteria, such as (1) relevance to TikTok content related to Bahlil Lahadalia, (2) containing elements of criticism, satire, or audience opinion, and (3) clarity of visual and textual elements for analysis. The meme comments identified in the 10 relevant uploads included repeated uses of the same meme images. To avoid duplication, repeated meme images were counted as one meme. After removing these repetitions, 26 unique memes were identified as the initial dataset. From these 26 memes, 10 memes were selected for in-depth analysis based on their relevance to the research focus, the clarity of their visual and textual signs, and their ability to illustrate the communication themes that emerged from the dataset (Johann, 2022).

This study used publicly accessible content from the TikTok platform. The data were collected solely for academic purposes and were limited to meme images and their textual elements relevant to the research focus. To protect the privacy of TikTok users, usernames, profile information, and other personally identifiable information were not included in the analysis or presented in the manuscript (Ross & Rivers, 2017).

Data analysis was carried out using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to examine the visual and textual signs contained in the memes. The stages of analysis include: (1) identification of visual and text marks, (2) denotative meaning, (3) connotative meaning, and (4) myth analysis to uncover the ideology or cultural meaning hidden behind memes. The memes were then grouped based on the communication themes that emerged, and their meanings were interpreted according to the relevant social and political context (Bebić & Volarevic, 1970; Zhang, 2025).

To strengthen the credibility and consistency of the interpretation, this study used theoretical triangulation by integrating Roland Barthes' semiotic framework with perspectives from digital political communication and comparing the interpretation with findings from relevant previous research. The visual and textual meanings identified through Barthes' denotative, connotative, and myth levels were compared with concepts and findings from previous studies on political memes, audience participation, and digital political communication. This comparison was used to assess whether the interpretation was consistent with established concepts and previous findings, while also identifying meanings that were specific to audience-generated memes in the TikTok comment section.

3. Result and Discussion

This study analyzed ten audience-generated political memes found in the comment sections of TikTok videos posted by @kompastv.indonesia concerning Bahlil Lahadalia. Each meme was analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework through denotation, connotation, and myth to examine how audiences constructed political meanings in response to the content. Based on the dominant messages conveyed, the ten memes were classified into four communication categories: political satire, direct criticism, humor, and sarcasm, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of Memes Analyzed in the Study

Meme Category	Number of Memes	Descriptions
Political	3	Meme that conveys criticism through irony, parody, or visual comparisons to the figure of Bahlil Lahadalia.
Satire Direct	2	Memes that convey explicit criticism of issues or statements of public figures.
Criticism	2	Memes that use elements of comedy and popular culture as a form of response to political news.
Humor	3	Memes that use sharp or mocking expressions to convey criticism or responses to political issues.
Sarcasm		

As presented in Table 1, the ten selected memes were classified into four communication categories: political satire, direct criticism, humor, and sarcasm. This classification was developed based on the dominant message conveyed in each meme while considering the related content, visual elements, and textual expressions accompanying the meme. The following discussion explains each category through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, covering the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth to reveal how audiences construct meaning in responding to political issues on TikTok.

Political Satire

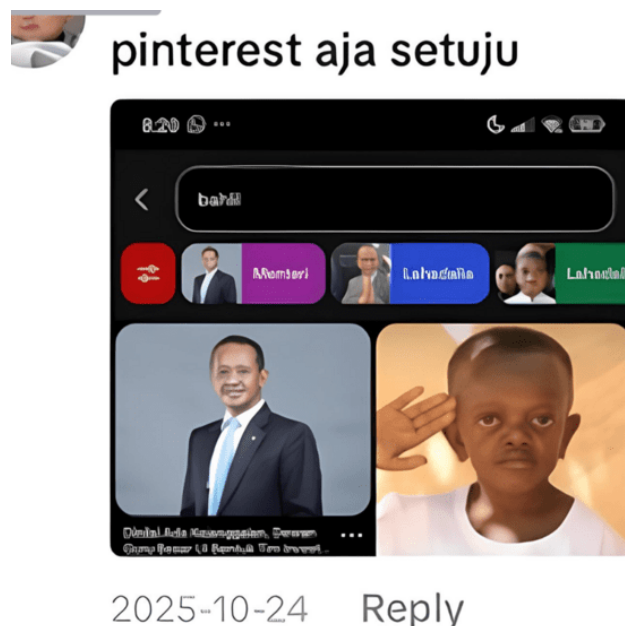


Fig. 1. Political satire meme comparing Bahlil Lahadalia with Pinterest search results.

Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025).

This meme was found in the comment column on the Kompas TV TikTok account uploaded which was published on October 22, 2025 regarding the reporting of the meme maker account related to public figure Bahlil Lahadalia in Fig. 1. The issue triggered an audience response in the form of memes as a representation of criticism of the dynamics of the digital space. At the denotation level, the meme displays a screenshot of an image search result on Pinterest that shows a photo of Bahlil Lahadalia side by side with other images that are considered to have a visual resemblance. The comparison is accompanied by the caption "Pinterest juga setuju".

At the level of connotation, the visual comparison implies a mockery of the image of a public figure through a humorous approach. The phrase "Pinterest just agrees" contains an irony that seems to use Pinterest search results as a justification for audience perception. Thus, humor not only serves as entertainment, but also becomes a way to convey criticism indirectly.

At the level of myth, the combination of the familiar Pinterest search interface and the ironic caption "Pinterest juga setuju" transforms a subjective comparison into an apparently objective visual confirmation. The connotative meaning of mockery therefore develops into a broader belief that digital search results can legitimize or reinforce public opinion. By presenting the audience's judgment through a recognizable search-result format, the meme makes a subjective political evaluation appear as something externally validated and socially recognizable. In Barthes' perspective, this process shows how digital media contributes to shaping social reality through the repeated reproduction of meaning.

These findings suggest that memes not only serve as a medium of entertainment, but also as a form of digital political communication that allows audiences to build criticism through visual symbols. While Wahjono et al. (2025) demonstrate that memes can convey political criticism in a light and meaningful form, the present finding extends this perspective by showing how such criticism is constructed through an audience-generated meme within a comment section. The meme therefore illustrates not only the critical function of memes, but also the participatory process through which audiences transform familiar digital formats into political expressions.



Fig. 2. Political satire meme depicting Bahlil Lahadalia as a superhero character.
Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025)

This meme appeared in the comment section of a Kompas TV TikTok post published on October 15, 2025, which discussed the issue of fuel shortages at private petrol stations in Fig. 2. In response to this issue, audiences created memes that combined the image of a public figure with a popular culture character as a form of political criticism. At the denotative level, the meme depicts a superhero character whose face or attributes have been modified to resemble the public figure, accompanied by the caption "Penyelamat Pertamina."

Connotatively, the superhero character functions as an ironic symbol rather than a literal representation of heroism. The label "Penyelamat Pertamina" satirizes the public figure's performance and policies by portraying them as a "hero" in a context where the audience perceives ongoing problems. Through the combination of humor and satire, the meme delivers criticism in a visually engaging form that is easily understood and shared among social media users.

At the level of myth, the connotation of exaggerated heroism develops into a broader cultural belief about how political figures are represented as "saviors" in public discourse. By replacing the expected heroic meaning with parody, the audience challenges this representation and turns the heroic image into an object of criticism. In Barthes' perspective, this process shows that myths about political figures can be produced as well as broken through the practice of visual communication on social media.

These findings suggest that audiences use popular culture symbols to construct political criticism implicitly through visual humor. This finding extends Kurniawan & Pd (2024) discussion of popular culture references in political memes by showing that such references can also function as audience-generated responses rather than only as elements of memes circulated as primary content. In this context, the comment section becomes a space where audiences reinterpret familiar cultural symbols to negotiate their position toward a political figure.



Fig. 3. Political satire stating that the public figure has become a meme without editing
Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025).

This meme appeared in the comment section of a Kompas TV TikTok post published on October 22, 2025, concerning the reporting of meme creator accounts related to public figure Bahlil Lahadalia in Fig. 3. The issue generated various audience responses, one of which was a meme that conveyed criticism without relying on visual manipulation. At the denotative level, the meme depicts an unedited photograph of the public figure accompanied by the caption "gak diedit juga sudah jadi meme" ("even without editing, it's already a meme").

Connotatively, the caption suggests that the public figure has already become an object of humor in the eyes of the audience, making additional visual editing unnecessary to create a comedic effect. Rather than functioning as a simple joke, the statement conveys satire by implying that the public figure's image has become associated with negative public perceptions circulating in the digital space. At the level of myth, the connotative suggestion that Bahlil is already recognizable as a "meme" develops into a broader belief that the public image of a political figure can be continuously redefined through audience interpretation. The statement "gak diedit juga sudah jadi meme" does not merely mock the figure; it naturalizes the idea that the audience's existing perception is sufficient to construct a recognizable political image without further intervention from media institutions. In Barthes' perspective, the process shows that social meanings can be produced continuously through the practice of digital communication and can challenge the authority of established media representations.

These findings show that audiences have an active role in building meaning for public figures through humor and satire in the digital space. Permatasari & Subyantoro (2020) demonstrate that social media comment sections provide a space for public expression and the construction of perceptions of political issues. The present finding extends this perspective by showing that such audience meaning-making can also occur through visual meme practices, in which a public figure's image is directly transformed into an object of humor and criticism (Dasfy et al., 2025). Based on the three memes in the political satire category, it can be seen that audiences use humor, irony, and popular culture references as strategies to criticize public figures without delivering criticism directly. Visual comparisons, the use of superhero characters, and the statement that public figures have become "memes" show that there is an effort to deconstruct the political image that was previously built through official narratives. At the level of myth, the three memes show that the meaning of public figures is not solely determined by institutions or mainstream media, but is also increasingly shaped through the collective interpretations that develop in the digital space. These findings suggest that satire serves not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a digital political communication practice that allows audiences to actively participate in building, negotiating, and disseminating political meanings through TikTok's comment columns.

Direct Criticism

Following the report of meme creator accounts related to public figure Bahlil Lahadalia, which was covered in a Kompas TV TikTok post on October 22, 2025, audiences responded by expressing criticism toward what they perceived as restrictions on freedom of expression in digital spaces in Fig. 4. One of the responses took the form of a meme featuring two individuals accompanied by the caption "ini bukan Bahlil ya" ("this is not Bahlil"). At the denotative level, the meme simply presents these two figures along with the caption, which serves as the primary element in conveying its message. At the connotative level, the phrase "ini bukan Bahlil ya" is not intended as a literal statement of identity but functions as a satirical response to the reporting of meme creators' accounts. Through humor and linguistic ambiguity, the meme reflects the audience's attempt to continue expressing criticism while implicitly suggesting an awareness of possible censorship or restrictions on political expression in digital spaces.



Fig. 4. Direct criticism meme using the phrase "Ini bukan Bahlil"
Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025).

At the level of myth, the ironic statement "ini bukan bahlil ya" develops from a humorous strategy of avoiding direct identification into a broader perception that political criticism in social media may be subject to surveillance or restriction. By presenting criticism indirectly, the meme makes the practice of adapting language to perceived restrictions appear as a recognizable strategy within digital communication. This condition encourages audiences to develop more adaptive communication strategies through the use of symbols, irony, and implicit meaning. In Barthes' perspective, the practice shows that the culture of digital communication not only shapes the way society conveys messages, but also influences the way meaning is produced in response to power relations in the digital public space.

This analysis demonstrates that audiences employ symbolic communication to express political criticism without diminishing the intended meaning of their messages. These findings support [Alfi & Zulita \(2025\)](#) which explains that political communication on social media can be constructed through symbols and signs that require audience interpretation. The present finding extends this perspective by showing that audiences do not merely interpret existing symbols, but also actively create and deploy them in image-based memes within comment sections. In this case, the meme functions as an adaptive form of political expression through which audiences negotiate how criticism can be communicated within a space perceived as restrictive.

Public debate surrounding the proposal to designate Suharto as a national hero also prompted audiences to express their views through memes in the comment section of Kompas TV's TikTok post. One of these memes directly criticized the historical narrative by featuring a visual related to the proposal accompanied by the caption "Sudah saatnya membuat kegaduhan" ("It's time to create a commotion"). At the denotative level, the meme simply presents this visual and caption as its primary communicative elements.

Connotatively, the meme goes beyond merely referring to the ongoing issue by criticizing attempts to reconstruct Suharto's positive public image. The phrase "Sudah saatnya membuat

kegaduhan" encourages audiences to question the dominant narrative by recalling historical controversies that remain embedded in Indonesia's collective memory in Fig. 5. In this way, the meme functions not only as an expression of rejection but also as a medium for reopening public discussion on historical and political issues.



Fig. 5. Direct criticism meme responding to the discourse on Soeharto as a national hero

Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025).

At the level of myth, this meme represents the belief that political history is not a fixed narrative, but a field of meaning that can be contested between state narratives and public memory. The connotative meaning of “making a disturbance” develops into a broader challenge to the normalization of a positive historical image of Suharto. By recalling unresolved historical controversies through a short and provocative expression, the meme makes the reinterpretation of political history appear as a legitimate form of public participation. In Barthes' perspective, memes serve as a medium that allows audiences to maintain collective memory while challenging the dominant narratives that thrive in digital public spaces.

This analysis suggests that memes function not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for preserving collective memory and encouraging public engagement with historical and political issues. Andriani (2019) shows that memes can construct representations and convey criticism of political narratives through visual symbols. The present finding adds an audience-participation dimension to this function by demonstrating how historical criticism is spontaneously reproduced through memes in the comment column. The comment space therefore functions not merely as a place to respond to media content, but as an arena in which audiences negotiate and reinterpret political and historical meanings through visual communication.

Taken together, the two memes categorized as direct criticism illustrate how audiences employ memes to communicate explicit criticism of political issues that attract public attention. Although they address different topics, namely restrictions on freedom of expression in digital spaces and debates over historical narratives, both memes reveal audiences' efforts to question political decisions, public policies, and dominant discourses through the combination of visual and textual symbols. Compared with the political satire category, which communicates criticism more

indirectly through humor, irony, and parody, these memes establish a more explicit connection between the visual representation and the political issue being criticized. At the level of myth, these memes suggest that digital spaces have evolved into arenas where political meanings are continuously negotiated, positioning audiences not merely as recipients of information but also as active producers of meaning. Accordingly, memes function as a form of digital political participation that enables audiences to express criticism while constructing alternative political discourses through TikTok comment sections.

Humor



Fig. 6. Humor meme using the phrase "maaf gugup banget"

Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025)

Humor also emerged as one of the audience's responses to political content related to Bahlil Lahadalia on Kompas TV's TikTok account. One meme portrayed the public figure's facial expression accompanied by the caption "maaf gugup banget" ("sorry, I'm so nervous"), turning an ordinary expression into a humorous commentary in Fig. 6. At the denotative level, the meme simply presents the facial expression alongside the caption as its primary visual and textual elements. Connotatively, the phrase "maaf gugup banget" is not intended as a genuine apology but functions as a humorous interpretation of the public figure's communication performance. The audience associates perceived mistakes or inaccuracies in delivering messages with nervousness, using humor as an indirect way to criticize public communication. By presenting criticism in a lighthearted manner, the meme makes its message more accessible and relatable to social media users.

At the level of myth, the meme reflects the broader expectation that public figures should demonstrate confidence and competence when communicating with the public. When they appear hesitant or make statements that audiences perceive as unconvincing, these moments are quickly transformed into humorous content and widely circulated across social media. The humorous interpretation therefore turns a specific moment of perceived nervousness into a broader judgment

about how a political figure is expected to communicate, making confidence and competence appear as natural standards for evaluating public figures. From Barthes' perspective, this illustrates how digital culture contributes to shaping new social expectations regarding the public image and communication performance of political figures.

These findings suggest that humor not only serves as entertainment, but also as a communication strategy that allows audiences to convey criticism without resorting to direct confrontation. This is in line with Dewi (2019) which explains that expressive communication in digital media is often used to convey emotions and criticism in a more relaxed form. However, this study further demonstrates that humor, when manifested through audience-generated memes in TikTok comment sections, also serves as a participatory means of constructing meaning and evaluating the communication performance of public figures.



Fig. 7. Humor meme depicting Bahlil Lahadalia as Dora the Explorer
Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025)

Another humorous response emerged in the comment section of a Kompas TV TikTok post published on November 6, 2025 in Fig. 7. Rather than relying on textual humor, this meme generated its comedic effect through visual modification by transforming the face of a public figure into the animated character Dora the Explorer. At the denotative level, the meme depicts an edited image in which the public figure's face is altered to resemble the well-known cartoon character, creating a visual representation that differs from the original appearance.

Connotatively, the use of Dora the Explorer creates both a humorous effect and a form of satire directed at the public figure. By incorporating a widely recognized animated character, the meme allows audiences to interpret its humorous message more easily while simultaneously conveying political criticism. Instead of expressing criticism in a confrontational manner, the visual modification presents it as entertainment, encouraging collective engagement among social media users.

At the level of myth, the meme reflects how popular culture has evolved into an effective language of communication within digital spaces. References to popular culture no longer function solely as entertainment but have become symbolic resources for communicating political criticism

in ways that are accessible, engaging, and easily disseminated through social media. The transformation of a familiar cartoon character into a political representation makes the use of popular culture as a vehicle for political commentary appear natural within digital audience interaction. From Barthes' perspective, the transformation of an animated character into a political symbol illustrates how popular cultural icons acquire new meanings when placed within the context of digital political communication.

This analysis demonstrates that popular culture serves as an effective communication strategy through which audiences express criticism of public figures. These findings support [Fatanti & Prabawangi \(2021\)](#) who argue that memes function as symbolic media combining humor and criticism to communicate political messages. However, this study further demonstrates that references to popular culture are also employed spontaneously by audiences in TikTok comment sections, highlighting their active participation in constructing meanings surrounding contemporary political issues. Unlike direct criticism, which establishes a more explicit connection between the meme and the political issue being criticized, the humor category softens criticism through comedic interpretation and familiar popular culture references.

Taken together, the two memes categorized as humor illustrate how audiences employ comedy and references to popular culture to communicate criticism of public figures in a more accessible and entertaining manner. Although the two memes rely on different approaches, one humorously interpreting the public figure's communication performance through the caption "maaf gugup banget" and the other using visual modification by transforming the public figure into Dora the Explorer, both demonstrate that humor functions as a strategy for constructing political meaning while attracting audience attention to ongoing political issues. At the level of myth, these memes suggest that humor and popular culture have become integral to the language of digital communication, enabling political criticism to be expressed in ways that are more relatable, acceptable, and widely shared. Accordingly, humor functions not only as entertainment but also as a form of digital political communication that encourages audiences to participate in expressing criticism through visual symbolism and references to popular culture.

Sarcasm

This meme was found in the comment column on Kompas TV's TikTok upload published on October 15, 2025 regarding the issue of fuel scarcity at private petrol stations in [Fig. 8](#). The upload triggered an audience response expressing dissatisfaction with the communication of public figures through the use of sarcasm. At the denotation level, memes display the facial expressions of public figures with text "otak ku kosong". At the connotation level, the expression is not interpreted literally, but as a form of innuendo that leads to the quality of responses and statements of public figures. The audience uses this phrase to describe that the communication conveyed is considered to have no substance or is unable to answer the problems that are being faced by society. Compared to humor, the sarcasm in this meme shows a sharper and more explicit expression of criticism.

At the level of myth, this meme represents the assumption that formal political communication is often considered incapable of responding adequately to public unrest. This condition encourages the audience to express disappointment through sarcasm as a form of political participation in the digital space. The connotative meaning of "otak ku kosong" therefore develops into a broader social judgment that political communication is expected to provide meaningful responses to public problems. By repeatedly using sarcasm to express dissatisfaction, audiences make this form of indirect but sharp criticism a recognizable practice within digital political communication. In Barthes' perspective, the constructed meaning shows that satire has become a communication practice that is considered natural in responding to public figures on social media.

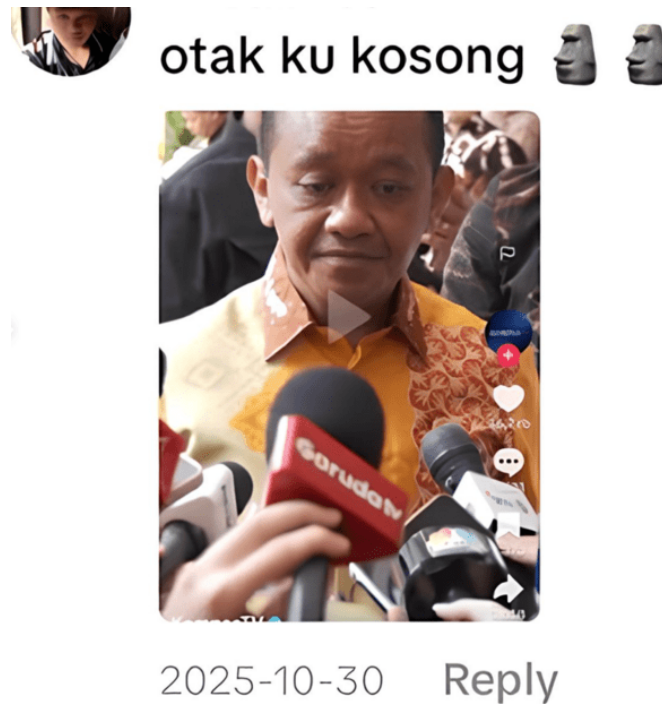


Fig. 8. Sarcasm meme using the phrase "otak ku kosong"
Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025)

These findings show that sarcasm is one of the communication strategies used by the audience to express dissatisfaction with political communication. Hasanah et al. (2025) explain that political communication on social media can elicit emotional responses in the form of criticism and sarcasm. The present finding extends this perspective by showing that such responses are not only manifested through textual comments, but are also transformed into audience-generated memes, allowing sarcasm to function as a visual and textual form of participation in building political meaning in the digital space.



Fig. 9. Sarcasm meme using the expression "memeg"
Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025)

This meme was found in the comment column on Kompas TV's TikTok upload published on November 6, 2025. Unlike previous memes that used explicit sentences, this meme featured a brief expression in the form of the term "memeg" as an audience's response to the evolving political situation in Fig. 9. At the denotation level, memes only display simple text in the form of the word "memeg" without formal language structure or additional explanations.

At the level of connotation, the term "memeg" is used as a form of emotional expression that describes a situation that is considered absurd or absurd by the audience. In the context of the upload, the use of this term does not only function as a joke, but also as an implicit satire on the political situation being discussed. Audiences use the concise language of the internet to express dissatisfaction without having to deliver criticism directly.

At the level of myth, this memes represent that digital communication no longer relies on the use of raw language to construct meaning. Rather, meaning is formed through social understanding among social media users so that terms that seem to have no formal meaning can still be understood as a form of satire and criticism by the digital community. The repeated use and shared understanding of such internet expressions make their political meaning recognizable within digital communities, even when the literal form of the expression does not explicitly contain criticism. In Barthes' perspective, the practice shows that internet culture has given birth to a new sign system that shapes the communication identity of the digital generation. This finding shows that the use of internet language is one of the audience's communication strategies for conveying implicit criticism of emerging political issues.

This finding indicates that internet language has become one of the communication strategies employed by audiences to express implicit criticism of contemporary political issues. This findings are consistent with Ismail et al. (2023) who argue that interactions on social media have fostered new forms of communication that adapt to the characteristics of digital culture. However, the present study further demonstrates that internet language functions not only as a marker of online community identity but also as a participatory medium through which audiences communicate sarcasm and construct political meanings through memes shared in TikTok comment sections.

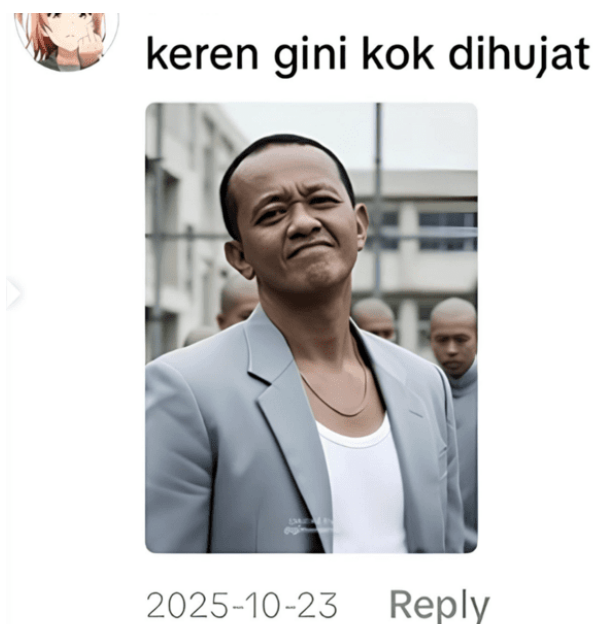


Fig. 10. Sarcasm meme using the phrase "keren gini kok dihujat"
Source: TikTok @kompastv.indonesia (2025)

This meme was found in the comment column on Kompas TV's TikTok upload published on October 22, 2025 regarding the reporting of the meme maker's account related to public figure Bahlil Lahadalia. The upload evoked various audience responses, one of which was through the use of sarcastic sentences that questioned the controversy against public figures. At the denotation level, memes display a visual public figure accompanied by text "keren gini kok dihujat" in Fig. 10.

At the connotation level, the expression is not interpreted as a form of praise, but as a satire on the positive image attached to public figures. The sentence contains an irony that questions why a figure who is considered "good" or "cool" remains the target of public criticism. Through sarcasm, the audience expresses disapproval of the developing narrative while expressing distrust of the image that is constructed. At the level of myth, these memes represent a public distrust of the ideal image built through the media. The audience sees that there is a difference between the image of public figures and the reality they perceive, so sarcasm is used as a form of symbolic resistance to the narrative. The sarcastic reversal of the supposedly positive image makes distrust toward the idealized representation of the public figure appear as a shared and recognizable interpretation among audiences. In Barthes' perspective, memes become a medium that allows audiences to collectively deconstruct political imagery through digital communication practices.

These findings suggest that sarcasm is used as a communication strategy to question the image of public figures built in public spaces. This is in line with Fatanti & Prabawangi (2021) which explains that memes function as a representation of public opinion that reflects people's attitudes towards political issues. However, this study shows that such representation is not only realized through the production of memes as the main content, but also through memes produced spontaneously by the audience in the comment column as a form of digital political participation.

Based on the three memes in the sarcasm category, it can be seen that the audience uses sharp sarcasm expressions to express dissatisfaction with public figures and emerging political issues. Although it is conveyed through different forms, namely the use of sarcastic phrases, internet language, and irony against the image of public figures, the three memes both show that sarcasm is a communication strategy to convey criticism more emphatically in the digital space. Unlike humor, which tends to soften criticism through comedic interpretation, sarcasm retains a sharper evaluative function while still relying on indirect expression.

At the level of myth, the three memes represent the development of a digital communication culture that allows audiences to build and disseminate meaning through sarcasm, so that perceptions of public figures are no longer fully shaped by the media or official institutions. These findings show that sarcasm serves as a form of digital political communication that allows audiences to express dissatisfaction while simultaneously deconstructing political imagery through participatory practices in TikTok's comment columns.

Overall, the results show that memes produced by the audience in the TikTok comment column not only serve as an entertainment medium, but also as a form of digital political communication. Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the meaning contained in memes is constructed through the relationship between visual signs, text, and the context of emerging political issues. The four categories found, namely political satire, direct criticism, humor, and sarcasm, show that audiences use different communication strategies to convey criticism of public figures and political issues. These differences show that the form of delivering criticism on social media is not single, but is adjusted to the purpose and effect of communication that is to be built.

The findings of this study also show a shift in the role of audiences in digital political communication. Audiences no longer only act as recipients of information, but also as producers of meaning who actively produce, modify, and disseminate memes in response to political issues. This

role is evident across the four categories identified in the analysis: political satire allows audiences to reinterpret established images of public figures through irony and popular culture; direct criticism enables them to articulate explicit responses to political issues; humor transforms perceived weaknesses in public communication into accessible political commentary; and sarcasm allows audiences to challenge idealized images and dominant narratives through sharper indirect expressions. This process shows that the social media comment column has developed into a space for political participation that allows people to build alternative discourses through visual symbols, humor, satire, and sarcasm. Thus, the practice of political communication is no longer dominated by political actors or mainstream media, but is also shaped through the collective participation of social media users.

These findings expand on previous research that generally placed memes as content produced by specific creators or accounts. Instead, this study shows that memes are also produced spontaneously by the audience in the comment column as a form of digital political participation. Thus, the contribution of this research lies in the understanding that the comment column is not only a space for interaction between users and content creators, but also a space for the production of political meaning through visual communication practices carried out participatory by the audience. Empirically, the study demonstrates that audience-generated memes can function as political responses through which users construct and negotiate meanings about public figures. Theoretically, the findings demonstrate the usefulness of Barthes' semiotic framework for examining how visual and textual signs in audience-generated memes reproduce, challenge, and reshape political meanings within participatory digital spaces.

4. Conclusion

This study aims to analyze audience-generated political memes appearing in the comment sections of the Kompas TV TikTok account using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The results of the study show that these audience-generated memes not only serve as entertainment, but also function as forms of digital political communication through which audiences convey opinions, criticisms, and responses to political issues and public figures. Based on semiotic analysis, four main categories were found, namely political satire, direct criticism, humor, and sarcasm. These four categories show that the meaning of memes is built through the relationship between visual signs, textual elements, and the relevant social and political context.

The research also shows that TikTok's comment section is no longer just a space for interaction between users and content creators, but has evolved into a space of digital political participation that allows audiences to express responses and construct political meanings through audience-generated memes. Empirically, this study contributes to the understanding of memes as visual forms of audience participation in TikTok comment sections, rather than merely as content produced and circulated by social media creators. Theoretically, the study demonstrates how Roland Barthes' semiotic framework can be applied to examine the construction of political meaning through the combination of visual and textual signs in audience-generated memes. Thus, this study expands the study of political memes that previously focused more on memes as content produced and circulated as primary social media content. Therefore, further research can examine audience-generated political memes on other social media platforms or use different approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of digital political communication practices on social media.

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