



Intertextuality in 2024 Indonesian Presidential Debate Memes on X

Odytyas Fanni Anggraheni Dewanti Valkenburg¹, Bima Prana Chitra², Emmy Erwina³

^{1,2,3}Department of English Literature, Universitas Harapan Medan, Indonesia

Correspondence E-mail: odytyas.dewanti@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The advent of social media has led to changes in the way people communicate. One such change is in the usage of memes, especially among the younger generation. With Gen Z and Millennials making up over 50% of the voters in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, memes became one way they voiced their opinions on the televised debates held prior to the election. This research aimed to find out how intertextuality impacted the meaning of political memes about the 2024 Indonesian presidential candidate debates. This research employed the qualitative method. The critical discourse analysis by Fairclough was used to analyze the data. The memes were limited only to those that referenced works of literature that were uploaded on the social media platform X on the day of or the day after the first, third, and fifth presidential debates. The findings indicated that intertextuality in

memes added a layer of complexity and nuance that allowed the creators to criticize the candidates implicitly through humour, thus circumventing censorship and IET laws. The memes functioned as a mode of political advocacy and public discussion, mainly in the form of criticism of the candidates' actions during the debates. Criticism of the first and third debates likely contributed to the calmer proceedings of the final debate.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian general election is the most complicated single-day ballot in the world, combining presidential, parliamentary, and local legislative elections in one day (Bland, 2019 in Raharadi & Amali, 2019). The three presidential candidates in the 2024 election were Anies Baswedan, Prabowo Subianto, and Ganjar Pranowo. With three presidential candidates in the 2024 election, one candidate must win at least 50.1 % of

the votes to avoid a runoff election. Aside from effective campaigns, the presidential candidates' participation and performance in the televised presidential debates was one way for them to appeal to the voting public. The 2024 presidential debates were the seventh held since 1999. In its most recent iteration, it consisted of five debates: three for the presidential candidates and two for the vice-presidential candidates. On average, 94 million people tuned in to watch each of the five debates (Kompas, 2024).

The use of social media in politics is more important than ever now that just over half of the voters were from the younger generation (Kompas, 2023). Of the 204.8 million people registered to vote in 2024, the majority were Millennials, making up nearly 69 million or 33.6% of the total. A further 48.8 million people or 22.8% were Generation Z. During and after the debates, the Indonesian public discussed the proceedings and the candidates' performance on various social media platforms, including X, formerly known as Twitter. Some of these comments on the debates took the form of memes. Thus, social media was not only useful for campaigns, but also to monitor and measure the public opinion of the presidential candidates.

The concept of memes was first introduced by Richard Dawkins, who defined memes as a cultural component that is transmitted through non-genetic means, through imitation and repetition (Gearhart et al., 2020). Today, internet memes are defined as a piece of content spreading online between users which transforms along the way (Börzsei, 2013, in Gearhart et al., 2020), and are becoming increasingly common as a method of expression. The ability to tune a meme's meaning by altering the text or image makes it highly versatile in discussing various topics (Bates et al., 2023). In discussing politics on social media, a meme's humorous, intertextual nature allows its creator—who is often anonymous or pseudonymous—to evade censorship, especially in non-democratic countries (Gearhart et al., 2020; Shifman, 2014). Shifman (2014) highlighted memes as one way to stimulate political participation among the younger generation, since they fulfil three functions: as persuasion and political advocacy, grassroots action, and mode of public discussion and expression.

Intertextuality, introduced by Kristeva and synthesized from Saussure's semiotics and Bakhtin's dialogism, happens when a text references a prior, known text (Norrick, 1989 in Chłopicki & Brzozowska, 2021), and is an integral part of the meaning of a meme. Intertextual knowledge of other meme templates often helps a viewer determine the

purpose of the meme (Lin et al., 2014). Furthermore, intertextual references to other texts, especially iconic ones, can add a layer of complexity and ambiguity that gives a meme more nuance and room for multiple interpretations (Chłopicki & Brzozowska, 2021; Shifman, 2014; Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018). Many modern internet memes derive their format from various works of literature, including cartoons, TV shows, movies, songs, and games.

Research on political memes during elections in Indonesia have been carried out before. Rahardi & Amalia (2019) used Fairclough's critical discourse analysis to analyse memes parodying presidential campaign posters of the fictional candidates Nurhadi-Aldo, and found that the memes represented the criticism from the Indonesian public, as well as the scepticism from the younger generation regarding politics in Indonesia. Mahadian & Hashim (2022) analysed the *Jokowi planga-plongo* memes that emerged during the 2019 presidential election with a social semiotics analysis. The research found that memes that used non-abusive language to insult the president were more likely to evade the EIT law. Aminulloh et al. (2022) analysed propaganda in memes during the 2019 election with Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and found that memes were used to influence public opinion on the presidential candidates. Outside of Indonesia, Kulkarni (2017) studied the impact of political memes in India and found that memes were acknowledged as tools of political discourse, but did not have much impact on the public's political decisions.

Research on intertextuality in memes have also been carried out. Zenner & Geeraerts (2018) studied image macro memes and found four dimensions of meme interpretation based on complexity. They found that intertextual memes often require more effort to understand even among meme-savvy people. Gearhart et al. (2020) analysed how people take advantage of the visual and intertextual nature of memes in political discourse in both democratic and non-democratic countries, and found that political memes in non-democratic countries tended to be more subtle. Chłopicki & Brzozowska (2021) analysed COVID-19 memes in Poland, and found that intertextual references to Polish media made the humour in the memes more sophisticated.

Few studies on political memes about electoral debates have been carried out. This research intends to fill this gap by focusing on memes containing intertextual references to works of literature that emerged during and after the 2024 Indonesian presidential

debates on the social platform X. The objective of this research is to find out how these intertextual references formed and affected the meaning of the memes.

METHOD

The qualitative method was employed for this research. The data analysis procedure by Miles et al. (2014) was used, consisting of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data was obtained from the social media platform X from the day of and the day after the first, third and fifth presidential candidate debates, namely on 12-13 December 2023, 7-8 January, and 4-5 February 2024. The advanced search function on X was used to help limit the search parameters to the aforementioned dates, as well as by keywords such as the presidential candidates' names and ballot numbers, and hashtags such as *#debatcapres* and *#DebatCapres*. Only memes containing intertextual references to works of literature in the form of image, superimposed text or caption were selected. In total, 52 memes containing literary references were obtained after data condensation, which excluded memes that were exact copies of each other.

Conclusions were drawn by analyzing the data using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, which comprised three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 2001 in Rahardi & Amalia, 2019). The textual dimension is limited only to the linguistic content of the text, in this case the image and the text that modified the image. The discursive practice focused on the production, distribution, and consumption of the text, while the social practice focused on the sociocultural context surrounding the text and the public reaction to the text.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the memes is divided into three dimensions. The first dimension was textual analysis of the content of the memes. The second dimension was analysis of the discursive practice of the creation, distribution, and consumption of the memes. The final dimension was the socio-cultural practice, namely the reaction of the public and the impact of the memes.

Textual Analysis

The textual analysis was performed on the visual and verbal signs in the selected memes. In figure 1, the presidential candidates were replaced by fictional characters who shared a physical resemblance with them. Anies Baswedan was represented by Senator Armstrong from the 2013 video game *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, shown in the top left. In the top right, Ganjar Pranowo was represented by Homelander, portrayed by actor Antony Starr, from the TV show *The Boys* (2019-present). At the bottom, Prabowo Subianto was represented by Drax the Destroyer, portrayed by Dave Bautista, from the 2014 movie *Guardians of the Galaxy*. The positioning of the characters, and the 'vs' separating the top and bottom of the image, indicated that Anies and Ganjar were together against Prabowo.



Figure 1. Senator Armstrong and Homelander vs Drax the Destroyer (source: x.com/zzzzzlayz)

At surface level, the selection of these characters would appear to be based solely on physical resemblance, which could still be recognized by viewers who were unfamiliar with the literary works associated with the characters. At a deeper level, however, the choice of Senator Armstrong to represent Anies could imply Anies's American ties and western views, Homelander as Ganjar could represent his similarities to Jokowi just as Homelander possessed similar powers to Superman, and Drax the Destroyer who went to prison for going on a rampage to avenge his family could be alluding to Prabowo's alleged involvement with past human rights cases. The use of villains to represent Anies

and Ganjar and a hero to represent Prabowo could also be an indication of the meme creator's political stance, and thus served as political advocacy. By using characters that resemble the candidates and not pictures of the candidates themselves, the creator made a visual, intertextual meme that was obvious to the public but not to censorship algorithm, similar to the findings of Gearhart et al. (2020).



Figure 2. Ganjar with Exodia the Forbidden One (source: x.com/icassptr)

Figure 2 featured an image of Ganjar taken from the third debate, with the image of a playing card superimposed onto his hand. The card, known as *Exodia the Forbidden One*, originated from the trading card game from the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* franchise, based on a comic series of the same name by Kazuki Takahashi which ran from 1996 to 2004. In the franchise, the card has ability to instantly win a game if the conditions written on the card were fulfilled. Its use in figure 2, further highlighted by the yellow action lines around it, emphasized its importance, and was indicative of the creator's opinion that Ganjar won the third debate. Understanding this meme requires knowledge of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* as well as a specific card. The use of the card and this reliance of intertextual knowledge creates complex, sophisticated humour, which agrees with the findings of Chłopicki & Brzozowska (2021).



Figure 3. *By Making Them Prosper, Right?* (source: x.com/aa_jojo29)

The memes in figure 3 and figure 4 used a template which originated from the 2002 movie *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*. In the scene, Anakin and Padme were having a picnic and discussing politics. At some point during the discussion, Anakin stated that he would support a dictatorship if it was necessary, and Padme was unsettled by his statement. To those familiar with *Star Wars*, Anakin would become Darth Vader, one of cinema's most iconic villains. The use of this meme template to criticize Prabowo was likely deliberate and intended to draw a parallel between the two.

In both figure 3 and 4, Anakin represented the Prabowo-Gibran pair while Padme represented the Indonesian public. In the first panel of figure 3, Anakin says *Prabowo-Gibran Target Hilangkan Kemiskinan dalam 2 Tahun* 'Prabowo-Gibran Targets Eradication of Poverty in 2 Years'. In the second panel, Padme asks *Dengan cara mensejahterakan mereka kan?* 'By making them prosper, right?'. In the third panel, Anakin gazes silently. In the last panel, Padme asks again *kan?* ('right?')



Figure 4. Silent Anakin (source: x.com/unmagnetism)

The meme in figure 4 featured only the third panel, and the meme was modified by the caption, which was written in four lines. The first line read *sesi pertama* 'the first session'. The second line read *01: bansos* '01: social assistance' followed by the fire emoji. The third line read *03: undang2 cipta kerja* '03: the job creation law' followed by the grain of rice emoji. The final line read *02: menghilangkan kemiskinan* '02: eradicating poverty'. A space between the third and final line served as visual separation to clarify that the meme was a reaction to the final statement only. 01, 02 and 03 were ballot numbers representing Anies, Prabowo and Ganjar respectively. The use of ballot numbers instead of names was likely to evade censorship.

The use of only the third panel of the meme signified Prabowo's silence when asked to elaborate on how exactly he planned to eradicate poverty. It could also imply the creator's doubts about Prabowo's motives and methods for eradicating poverty. Although the memes in figure 3 and figure 4 contained the same idea, understanding the meme in figure 4 requires intertextual knowledge of the full format shown in figure 3, since the meaning in figure 4 was more implied rather than explicitly stated, and the viewer must fill in the blanks themselves. Lack of intertextual knowledge of a meme's template would make memes hard to understand, as demonstrated in previous research by Lin et al. (2014) and Bates et al. (2023), though both researches were more focused on methods to learn about memes.



Figure 5. Safety First (source: x.com/cxltured)

The meme in figure 5 is another demonstration of a meme that only employed a part of the full template. It derived its format from a 4-panel comic known as *Adarsh Balak* or “ideal boy” by artist Priyesh Trivedi, which parodied educational posters in India. The meme in figure 5 used only the third panel. The first panel shows the boy in green and the boy in yellow fighting, with the boy in green defending and the boy in yellow attacking, while the boy in blue watches. In the second panel, the boy in blue interrupts the fighting. In the third panel, seen in figure 5, the boy in blue offers boxing gloves. The fourth panel shows the boys resuming their fight with boxing gloves, with the boy in yellow punching the boy in green in the face, while the boy in blue watches and eats popcorn.

In figure 5, representation was shown through visual parallels between the comic at the top and the image taken from the third debate at the bottom. Prabowo was thus represented by the boy in green, Ganjar was represented by the boy in blue, and Anies was represented by the boy in yellow. The choice of Prabowo in green and Anies in yellow and not vice versa was deliberate when seen in the context of the full meme and the proceeding of the third debate, since for most of the debate Prabowo was on the defensive, Anies was on the offensive, and Ganjar was mainly uninvolved, at least early in the third debate. Intertextual knowledge of the external references in this meme agrees

with the findings of Zenner & Geeraerts (2018), who discovered that intertextual and external references create more complex memes.

Discursive Practice

The analysis of the discursive practice focused on the production, distribution, and consumption of the memes. All the memes obtained for this research were made during or after the presidential debates, and were distributed by uploading them to X. There was an influx of memes during this period, which did not escape the notice of many social media users. This self-awareness can be seen in some of the memes that were found, which in part discussed the creation and consumption of memes about the debates.



Figure 6. Drakeposting (source: x.com/cxltured)

The meme in figure 6 represented its creator's preference to watch the debates to make memes about them rather than to help them decide which candidate to vote for. It could be viewed as a criticism of the debate as well, calling them meme-worthy rather than educational. This was a view that was shared by other political observers and the president especially after the third debate, which was filled with personal attacks.

The meme in figure 7 represented the creator's unwillingness to choose between watching the debate and scrolling through X to look at memes about the debate. Since many of the memes were uploaded during the debate, they could show social media users

the events of the debates in real time. The two events, occurring concurrently, gave people the ability to discuss the proceedings and voice their opinions publicly about things as they happen.

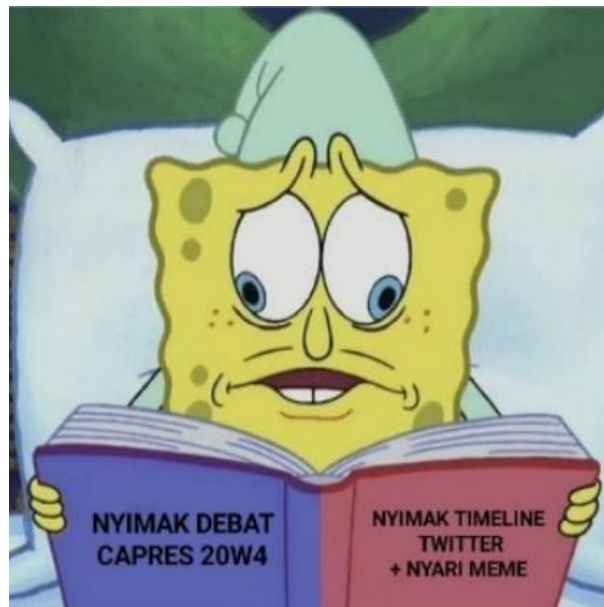


Figure 7. Cross-Eyed SpongeBob (source: x.com/cxltured)

The memes in this research were uploaded during and on the day after the presidential debates. The most common theme of the memes, especially during the first and third debates, was criticism of the debate's proceedings and the candidates' conduct. Most of the memes were uploaded during the third debate, followed by the first debate. Less memes, containing literary references or otherwise, were uploaded during the final debate. This corresponded with the arguments between the presidential candidates, which were especially heated during the third debate and non-existent in the final debate. The discursive practice of meme creation, distribution and consumption agrees with the findings of Gearhart et al. (2020), who highlighted the role of memes as a medium for the public to voice their opinions and criticisms without fearing censorship.

Social Practice



Figure 8. Sule Berantem (source: x.com/aldaptsr)

The analysis of the social practice focused on the sociocultural context surrounding the memes, as well as the public reaction to these memes. The memes were produced during and after the presidential debates, and represented the public's reactions to the events of the debates. Many of the memes discussed the arguments among the presidential candidates or certain candidates' behaviour during the debates. The format seen in figure 8 was one of many that discussed the arguments. Similar to figure 5, it depicted Anies and Prabowo fighting each other while Ganjar remained uninvolved. This particular meme was one of the most viewed memes about the debates on X, garnering 2.6 million views and 24 thousand likes. The same format appeared a few more times on X, showing the public's agreement with it.



Figure 9. *Wakanda no More, Indonesia Forever* (source: x.com/aniesbaswedan)

The most-viewed meme found for this research was uploaded by Anies Baswedan's own official account on X, garnering 3.2 million views and 23 thousand likes, shown in figure 9. The meme referenced a popular quote from the 2018 movie *Black Panther*. The quote was the greetings and salute of the fictional country of Wakanda, "Wakanda forever" accompanied by both arms crossed in an X over the chest. To end his closing speech during the first debate, Anies did the salute, but modified the greeting to "Wakanda no more, Indonesia forever." It could be viewed as his attempt to relate more to the younger generation. In response, several memes referencing this quote emerged on X following the debate.

As demonstrated by Shifman (2014), the memes primarily fulfilled the function of political advocacy, both explicit and implicit, and as a mode of public discussion and expression, while still allowing the public to remain anonymous and uncensored (Gearhart et al., 2020). The criticism that emerged during the discussion of the presidential candidates' conduct and constant arguments, combined with criticism from political observers and the president, likely contributed to the calmer proceedings of the final debate which in turn resulted in fewer memes.

Although many of the memes showed advocacy or preference towards Anies or Ganjar, these did not reflect the election results, thus proving the findings of Kulkarni (2017), who found that while the public acknowledged memes as a medium for political

discourse, they do not sway public opinions or affect one's political decisions.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis, it can be concluded that intertextual references add a layer of complexity and nuance to a meme's meaning. They allow the creators to discuss the debates and criticize the candidates through humor. The reliance of the meme's meaning on the viewer's intertextual knowledge allowed the creators to imply certain things and not state them explicitly, thus allowing them to evade censorship and circumvent IET laws.

Since the memes were made during or after the debates, they reflected the public's views and opinions of the debates' proceedings, including their views of the candidates' answers and their conducts during the debates, in real-time. Many of the memes discussed the personal arguments and attacks among the candidates, and the way the presidential candidates were portrayed in these memes reflected the public's opinions of them. The abundance of memes making fun of and criticizing the candidates' actions during the debate reflected the public's views, as well as the views of political observers in Indonesia, and these criticisms may have contributed to the calmer proceedings of the final debate.

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