

A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF IMPLICATURE AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN ENGLISH AND INDONESIAN MEMES

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Abstract

Internet memes can be considered as multimodal constructions as they typically involve a combination of images and texts. Memes are commonly humorous, but they have also been used to convey more specific messages, such as memes that include gender representation contents. Additionally, the messages included in the memes are not always explicitly presented. In other words, the memes contain implicature, and the readers must be able to interpret the implied meaning to fully understand them. Although several studies on gender representation in memes have been conducted, studies that compare the gender representation in English and Indonesian memes are scarce. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by highlighting how men and women are portrayed in English and Indonesian memes. More specifically, the purpose of this research is to examine how the multimodal elements in memes (i.e., image and text) interact with one another and contribute to the construction of the implicature regarding gender representation. The research also aims to investigate whether there are similarities and differences in the way gender is represented in the English and Indonesian memes. A total of 12 “men vs. women” memes (6 English and 6 Indonesian) taken from various internet sources serve as the main data and are analyzed qualitatively. The findings reveal that both the text and image in memes play a significant role in the construction of the implicature regarding gender representation. Additionally, it is also found that men and women are portrayed very similarly between the English and Indonesian memes.

Keywords – *multimodality, implicature, gender representation, memes*

Introduction

Internet memes can be considered as multimodal constructions as they typically involve a combination of images and texts. Memes are commonly humorous and are made with the intention of entertaining their readers. Nonetheless, memes have also been used to convey specific messages concerning more sensitive subjects. For instance, memes have been found to contain contents related to racism (Zia, Castro and Tyson, 2021; Wu and Wall, 2021). Another theme that is commonly found in memes concerns gender. Several studies have explored how gender is represented in memes (Drakett, Rickett, Day and Milnes, 2018; Mahfouz, 2021; Sultana, Baig, Sahhzadi, Aman and Noreen, 2023).

In addition to the topics found in the memes, it should be noted that the messages included in them are not always explicitly presented. In other words, the memes contain implicature, and the readers must be able to interpret the implied meaning to fully understand them. Some researchers have investigated how the images and the text interact with one another to portray the implicit meaning behind the memes (Rina, Yanti and Idham, 2020; Angesti and Meilasari, 2021; Hamza and Yunus, 2022; Siah, Septiyatik & Fikri, 2023).

Although several studies that emphasize on gender representation in memes have been conducted, studies that compare the gender representation in English and Indonesian memes

are scarce. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by highlighting how men and women are portrayed in English and Indonesian memes. More specifically, the purpose of this research is to examine how the multimodal elements in memes (i.e., image and text) interact with one another and contribute to the construction of the implicature regarding gender representation. The research also aims to investigate whether there are similarities and differences in the way gender is represented in the English and Indonesian memes. From this background, the following research questions are proposed:

1. How do the multimodal elements in the memes contribute to the construction of the implicature regarding gender representation?
2. How are men and women portrayed in English and Indonesian memes?

Methods

The source of data for the current study is the memes containing gender representation. More specifically, a total of 12 “men vs. women” memes are purposively selected and taken from various internet sources (e.g., Memedroid, Imgur, MemeZilla, Memeslucu and Memecomic.id). Seeing as one of the objectives is to compare between English and Indonesian memes, the 12 memes utilized in the study are divided equally between the two. To be exact, there are 6 English and 6 Indonesian memes that serve as the main source of data. The selected memes focus on specific categories such as friendship and academic performance.

The current study employs a descriptive qualitative design as the data analysis does not involve any specific calculations and is more concerned with the interpretation of the implicit meaning behind the memes. In other words, the data is analyzed qualitatively in accordance with the two proposed research questions. To answer the first question, the researcher analyzes the interaction between the multimodal elements in the memes, namely the image and text, and sees how it can construct the implicit meaning related to gender representation. After the memes are examined in terms of their meaning, they are compared between the English and Indonesian memes to find out whether there are any similarities or differences in how men and women are portrayed in these two groups.

Finding and Discussion

a. Finding

As has been previously described, there are 12 memes utilized in this study, 6 English and 6 Indonesian. These memes are presented in pairs below based on their specific categories to make the comparison easier.

1) Aesthetic vs. Function



Figure 1. English Meme 1



Figure 2. Indonesian Meme 1

In Figure 1, we can see that there is an image of the inside of a car focusing on the steering wheel with a pink rose on it and the indicators behind the wheel. There is also the texts *Girls see the rose* and *Guys see the "low tire pressure."* From these elements, it can be implied that girls are more concerned with things that are beautiful or attractive while guys pay more attention to functional things. In this case, the indicator warning "low tire pressure" is something worth noticing, especially in a car since it could threaten the safety of the people inside the car. Hence, in this particular context, it can be concluded that girls prioritize aesthetics and beauty while guys are more concerned with functional and technical things.

As for Figure 2, it is dominantly made up of texts with just a small image of a man's face smiling at the bottom right corner saying *emejing* which is the Indonesian slang version or spelling of the adjective 'amazing.' In this meme, men and women are compared in terms of what they look for when buying a cellphone. Women look at the camera, the color of the phone, and even the cover. Men on the other hand, look at the ram, memory, internet speed, and other technical features of the phone. Thus, it can be said that women focus more on the aesthetics and appearance of the phone while men pay more attention to the specifications or the functionality of the phone.

If we compare the two memes, it can be argued that both English and Indonesian memes more or less have similar views regarding men and women. Specifically, women tend to be more concerned with aesthetic and appearance while men are more functional or practical since they focus more on things related to usage and function. Although both memes use different texts and images, they more or less convey similar messages.

2) Organization

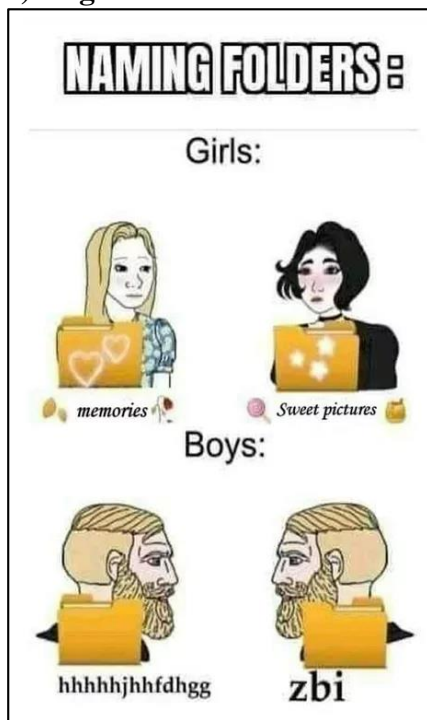


Figure 3. English Meme 2



Figure 4. Indonesian Meme 2

Figure 3 above shows images of two women and two guys. There are also images of computer folders along with each person in the meme. As for the texts, the top says *Naming folders* and right under the image of the computer folders are texts that are supposed to represent how these people name their folders. Based on the images and the texts, it can be interpreted that women are more organized than men, especially when it comes to naming their computer folders since the women give very specific names such as *memories* and *sweet pictures* while the men just give nonsense names such as *hhhhhjhhdhgg* and *zbi*. Likewise, Figure 4 shows more or less the same thing. The women name their folders with proper names like *My Photos* and *My Videos*, while the men name their folders using similarly gibberish names such as *hgjuh77978uhhhh*.

With regards to the comparison between the English and Indonesian memes, they both used very similar images and texts to convey a similar message, i.e., that women are more organized than men. Moreover, it can also be interpreted that women are more meticulous than men since they are more detailed and careful. Men on the other hand are less attentive and do not care too much about small details, which is portrayed in the way they name their folders haphazardly. Therefore, it would seem that men and women are viewed similarly in English and Indonesian memes when it comes to being organized and meticulous.

3) Academic Performance



Figure 5. English Meme 3



Figure 6. Indonesian Meme 3

Based on Figure 5 and 6 above, it can be seen that the texts deal with the score that the men and women get, and the images depict their reactions when getting those scores. Seeing as the women in both figures seem depressed and disappointed despite getting high scores (i.e., 97 and 80), while the men are happy even though they get low scores (i.e., 35) or just average scores (i.e., 70), it can be concluded that the message being conveyed in these memes is that women highly value academic performance while men do not. The interaction between the images and texts clearly demonstrates this. In Figure 5, there is also the text *I wanna go home* that accompanies the image of a girl that looks really sad, which shows that she is very disappointed with herself and just wants to go home as she probably considers herself to be a failure. While in Figure 6, although there are no texts in the images, the expressions of both the women and men clearly illustrate how they feel regarding their scores. For instance, one of the women in this figure looks really frustrated and pulls on her own hair, while one of the men in the figure has a really big smile on his face which shows that he is really pleased even though he only gets a score of 70.

In terms of how men and women are depicted in the English and Indonesian memes, it can be argued that women and men have the same characteristic when it comes to academic performance. Namely, women really care about how well they do academically. We can even say that they are close to being perfectionists since a score of 97/100 seems like a huge failure for them. In contrast, men do not care too much about their academic performance and are already satisfied despite only getting low or average scores. Hence, it would seem like the stereotype for men and women is quite similar in English and in Indonesian when it comes to academic performance and achievements.

4) Friendship



Figure 7. English Meme 4



Figure 8. Indonesian Meme 4

In terms of the images that can be found in both Figures 7 and 8, they more or less show guys and girls hanging out together. The texts in Figure 7 illustrate the difference between girl and guy friendships, where the girls say positive statements such as *oh my god I love you guys*, while the guys say insults like *Bitch!* and *Asshole*. Nonetheless, there is also the writing that girl friendship only *lasts 2-3 years*, while guy friendships *lasts forever*. From these elements, it can be implied that when girls and guys hangout, they say things that they do not really mean. This implication is actually explicitly stated in Figure 8, where it is stated that when guys hang out and mock one another they do not really mean it. Likewise, when girls hang out, they compliment each other, but they do not really mean what they say either. Thus, based on the interaction between the images and texts in Figures 7 and 8, it is possible to assume that guys use ‘insults’ as a way to bond, especially since they know that they do not really mean anything bad by saying the insults. In contrast, even though girls like to compliment each other, they also know that they are just being ‘friendly’ and they do not really mean to say positive things to their friends, so in the end the friendship between girls do not really last, or at least not as long as guy friendships.

Considering that the implied message between the English and Indonesian memes is more or less identical, it can be concluded that men and women are portrayed very similarly in English speaking countries and in Indonesia in terms of friendships and what they do when

they hang out. More specifically, the bonds between guys are stronger compared to the bonds between girls since their friendships typically last longer.

5) Practicality



Figure 9. English Meme 5



Figure 10. Indonesian Meme 5

Figure 9 above shows a woman and a man in a supermarket looking at shampoo products. The writing for the woman says *Shampoo for dry and damaged hair* while the text for the man says *6 in 1 shampoo for hair, face, body, carpet, car and dishes*. From the combination of these elements, it can be argued that the implied meaning of the meme is that men are more practical than women since they can just use one product for various purposes. On the other hand, even though women may be less practical than men, it also shows that women pay more attention to appearance and beauty, that is why they need to have very specific products for different types or conditions of hair. A similar meaning can also be implied from Figure 10. Although the images and texts are very different compared to the ones in Figure 9, it can be said that the meaning is alike since it shows that men use the same bag for different occasions while women have specific bags for the different occasions. Hence, just as the previous meme, the one in Figure 10 also implies that women are more concerned with appearance and men favor practicality in the sense that as long as the bag can be used, it does not matter what the occasion is and just use the same one all the time.

With regard to how men and women are portrayed, seeing as the two memes more or less share the same implied message, it can be said that westerners and Indonesians have similar views about men and women in terms of practicality. Specifically, men are more practical than women as they do not mind using one thing for several purposes or occasions. On the other hand, it also means that women emphasizes beauty and appearance more than men, since they would go the extra mile to use different things for different situations and purposes.

6) Dealing with the Pain

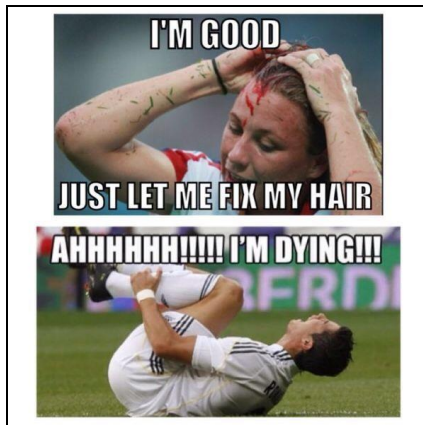


Figure 11. English Meme 6



Figure 12. Indonesian Meme 6

In Figure 11, we can see a woman and a man in the middle of a sports match, i.e., football. They are both in pain as the woman is bleeding on her forehead and the man is on his back holding his injured leg. The text for the woman is *I'm good, just let me fix my hair* while the caption for the man is *Ahhhhh!!!! I'm dying!!!* What can be implied from the combination of image and text here is that women are stronger than men in the sense that they can handle more pain than men. To be exact, the woman is bleeding but still says that she is good and can continue the match, while the man is probably exaggerating when he says that he is dying just from a leg injury. In contrast, Figure 12 seem to show the opposite since it is the women this time who are complaining from the pain of falling from the motorcycle, while the men seem to not be bothered too much from the pain.

Compared to the previous memes, this is the one time where men and women are illustrated differently. Based on these memes, it would seem that in the west, women are considered to be tougher than men as they can handle more pain. However, in Indonesian contexts, it would seem that it is the men who are considered as stronger since they have a higher pain tolerance compared to the women.

b. Discussion

Based on the findings described above, there are two main points worth discussing. First of all, in terms of the multimodality in memes, it is found that both the image and text have a crucial role in the construction of the implicature regarding the representation of men and women. It is the combination of both of these elements that help illustrate the hidden meaning which shows how men and women are generally viewed. This is in line with Jewitt's (2013, as cited in Nita, Setiawan, and Lestari, 2021) argument that the construction of meaning is the result of the relation between texts and images. Likewise, Hamza and Yunus (2022) stated that the interaction between both elements make the deduction of the meaning of a meme easier. If one is omitted or changed, then most likely the meaning of the meme would change as well. This is especially true of memes since it is often the case that they have certain

templates, in the sense that the same image can be used over and over again, but when combined with different texts, it would lead to a different interpretation of the memes. Although, it should be noted that there are times when one element may be more dominant and contribute more to the construction of the implicature. For example, in Figure 2, the meme is mostly made up of texts with only a small image included in it.

The last point that needs to be underscored concerns the representation of men and women in the English and Indonesian memes. Based on the result of this study, it would seem that men and women are viewed quite similarly between westerners and Indonesians. That is, they have similar characteristics which are portrayed in the memes. For instance, women tend to value appearance and beauty more than men, while men generally think that function and practicality is more important. With regard to friendship, men tend to insult each other in their daily interactions but end up having longer lasting friendships compared to women since men use insults playfully to create stronger bonds between them, while women use compliments hypocritically (i.e., they do not really mean to compliment their friends) and just as an act of courtesy, so that is why their friendships are not as tight as the men's. Mahfouz (2021) reported a similar finding when examining several memes portraying men and women friendships. Although most of the memes analyzed in the study seem to show that men and women are alike, there is one occasion in which they are illustrated very differently. More specifically, in terms of how men and women deal with pain, the English meme depict women as tougher than men. In contrast, the Indonesian meme show women as having lower pain tolerance compared to men.

Conclusions

Internet memes often contain various contents, one of them is the representation of men and women. Considering that memes are multimodal in nature, the interaction between the image and the text in the meme plays a significant role in the construction of meaning, especially when it is implied such as in the case of implicatures. The findings of the current study have highlighted how both the image and text in the memes contribute to how the memes portray the stereotypes of men and women, especially in western and Indonesian contexts. Based on the memes analyzed in this research, it is found that men and women are viewed quite similarly in both cultural contexts, with only one major difference, i.e., in terms of how men and women deal with pain.

In conclusion, seeing as the research is limited in various aspects, some suggestions for future studies are proposed. First, it is recommended that future research into memes incorporate a wider range of topics as the current one is only restricted to gender representation. A larger corpus of memes would also be preferable to get a better understanding of how memes can convey various messages, be it the explicit or implicit ones. Lastly, since memes are found to contain implicatures, it is suggested that future studies explore how memes can be used in language teaching, more specifically to improve students' overall pragmatic competence and their ability to understand and deduce implicit meanings. Some studies have revealed how Indonesians in general lack pragmatic competence (Retnowaty, 2017; Malik, 2019) even though it is something that is quite crucial for language learners. Considering this condition,

some researchers have highlighted the importance of developing learners' pragmatic competence (Nuridin, 2018; Nurdiana, 2019; Ariani, Basthomi, and Prayogo, 2021). Even though some studies have explored other ways to improve learners' pragmatic competence, such as through the use of movies (Nurdiana, 2012), it is possible that memes could be utilized for this purpose as well. Additionally, it has been found that using social media and other online resources could facilitate language learning in general (Rerung, 2021); therefore, it is suggested that the usage of memes are investigated further to find out whether they can be used as an effective tool to improve Indonesian EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

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