The Representation of Amabie During COVID-19 Pandemic: Japanese Digital Folklore as Internet Meme

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Abstract
This research describes various meme images with the representation of amabie as a symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. The data source are 14 images of amabie memes from an online article entitled "A 174-Year-Old Japanese Woodblock Meme is Here to Fight COVID-19" from printmag.com. The 14 meme images were collected by observation method through note-taking technique. The data that has been collected was analyzed using Kress & Leuween's (2006) reading image theory. This theory focuses on three metafunctions, namely representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. Result found that the prominent aspect from 14 meme images of amabie are the conceptual process as representational meaning; the indirect position or gaze, long shot, and vertical angle as interactive meaning; the centered composition, the placement in foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in colour, difference in sharpness as salience; and, the use of frame lines and empty space of framing as compositional meaning. All these aspect reflected that amabie was truly a savior to protect Japanese people from COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *amabie, COVID-19 pandemic, digital folklore, internet meme, Japanese folklore*

Abstrak
Penelitian ini mendeskripsikan berbagai gambar meme dengan representasi amabie sebagai simbol pandemi COVID-19 di Jepang. Sumber data berupa 14 gambar meme amabie dari artikel online berjudul "A 174-Year-Old Japanese Woodblock Meme is Here to Fight COVID-19" dari printmag.com. Pengumpulan 14 gambar meme dilakukan dengan metode observasi melalui teknik catat. Data yang telah terkumpul dianalisis menggunakan teori citra bacaan Kress & Leuween (2006). Teori ini berfokus pada tiga metafungsi, yaitu makna representasional, makna interaktif, dan makna komposisional. Hasil penelitian menemukan bahwa aspek yang menonjol dari 14 gambar meme amabie adalah proses konseptual sebagai makna representasional; posisi atau tatapan tidak langsung, long shot, dan sudut vertikal sebagai makna interaktif; komposisi di tengah, penempatan di latar depan atau latar belakang, ukuran relatif, kontras warna, perbedaan ketajaman sebagai arti-penting; dan, penggunaan garis bingkai dan ruang kosong bingkai sebagai makna komposisional. Semua aspek ini mencerminkan bahwa amabie benar-benar penyelamat untuk melindungi masyarakat Jepang dari pandemi COVID-19.

Kata kunci: *amabie, cerita rakyat digital, cerita rakyat Jepang, meme internet, pandemi COVID-19*

Introduction

Amabie is a mythological Japanese mermaid or merman with three legs or tail fins and a bird's beak for a mouth that purportedly emerges from the water prophesies either a plentiful harvest or an epidemic and instructs people to build duplicates of its likeness to protect themselves from illness (Murakami, 1999; Nagano, 2005; Yumoto, 2005). The amabie appears to be a variant or misspelling of the amabiko or amahiko, also known as the amahiko-nyudo, a prophetic beast depicted in various ways in different examples, mostly as 3-legged or 4-legged, and said to bear ape-like (sometimes torso-less), daruma doll-like, bird-like, or fish-like resemblance (Nagano, 2005; Yumoto, 2005). Typically, this material was conveyed in the form of illustrated woodblock print bulletins (kawaraban), pamphlets (surimono), or hand-drawn reproductions. On a print dated 1846, the amabie was represented. The discovery of a hand-painted booklet dated 1844 provided evidence that the amabiko predated the amabie (Nagano, 2005).

Amabie became a trending hashtag on Twitter in Japan during the COVID-19 outbreak. Manga artists (such as Chica Umino, Mari Okazaki, and Toshinao Aoki) used social media to share their cartoon interpretations of amabie (Mainichi Japan, 2020). The first was reportedly tweeted by Orochi Do, an art business specializing in youkai hanging scrolls, in late February 2020, when it tweeted "a novel coronavirus countermeasure" (Alt, 2020). Since March 2020, a twitter bot account (amabie14) has been gathering photographs of amabie (Kuhn & Kobayashi, 2020). This trend has discovered by Furukawa & Kansaku (2020), George (2020), and Merli (2020). George (2020) described what is amabie looks like as one of legendary monster in Japan. Merli (2020) also described amabie from its legendary history to become popular in various forms of character. Meanwhile, Furukawa & Kansaku (2020) described how amabie became a Japanese symbol of COVID-19 pandemic through social media. Among the three studies, there has been no research that discussed more deeper into the metafunction of the amabie meme image described by Japanese netizens through social media. Metafunctions in question are related to representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning under reading images theory stated by Kress & Leuween (2006). Therefore, this research will focus more on the implicit meaning behind various meme images with the representation of amabie as a symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan.

Method

This research is a qualitative research to describe the implicit meaning behind the amabie meme image. The data source is 14 images of amabie memes from an online article entitled A 174-Year-Old Japanese Woodblock Meme is Here to Fight COVID-19 from printmag.com. The 14 meme images were collected by observation method through note-taking technique. The data that has been collected was analyzed using Kress & Leuween's (2006) reading image theory. This theory focuses on three metafunctions, namely representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning.

Result and Discussion

Here are 14 meme images taken from the printmag.com article.

Figure 1 Amabie Image 1
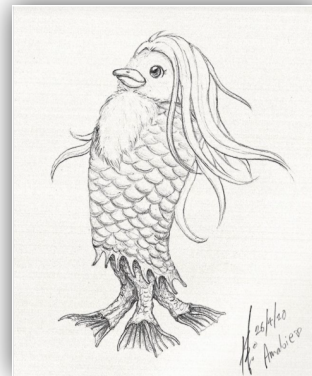

Figure 2 Amabie Image 2
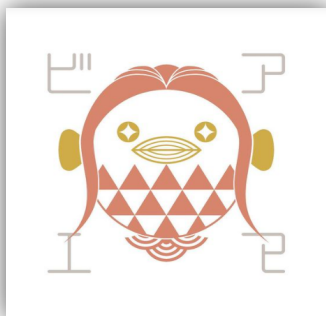

Figure 3 Amabie Image 3

Figure 4 Amabie Image 4

Figure 5 Amabie Image 5

Figure 6 Amabie Image 6

Figure 7 Amabie Image 7

Figure 8 Amabie Image 8
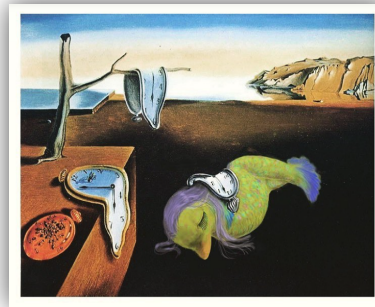
Figure 9 Amabie Image 9

Figure 10 Amabie Image 10
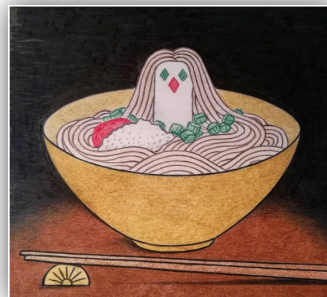
Figure 11 Amabie Image 11
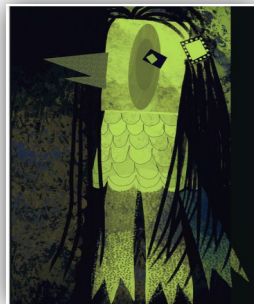
Figure 12 Amabie Image 12
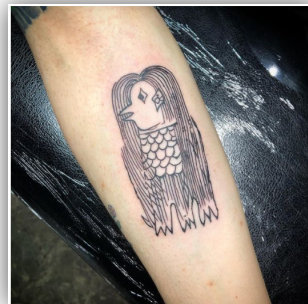
Figure 13 Amabie Image 13

Figure 14 Amabie Image 14

Representational Meaning

Representational meaning relates to events and participants used for expressing actions and ideas, presenting characters or showing circumstances. More specifically, it is related to the internal relations between represented participants, the action (s) they are performing as well as the setting of circumstance (Husein, 2019). The two patterns that show the internal relations of visual images are narrative process and conceptual process. Narrative process might be either transactional including both an actor and a goal, or they may be non-transactional, including only an actor. It can be seen in dynamic narrative images.

From 14 meme images, dynamic narratives images can be found in Figure 1, Figure 3, Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11, and Figure 12. In some memes, the narrative process of Figure 1 and Figure 3 is transactional. Figure 1 is involving amabie as an actor and two crows as a goal, meanwhile Figure 3 is involving female amabie as an

actor and a man as a goal. Otherwise, the narrative process of Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11, and Figure 12 is non-transactional, because involving one actor only, which is amabie. Although it is included in non-transactional aspect, these four memes can be described the setting of circumtances. Figure 9 is located in pond with lotus flowers; Figure 10 is adapted from The Persistence of Memory by Salvador Dali; Figure 11 is also adapted from Kanagawa-oki Nami Ura (The Great Wave off Kanagawa) by Japanese ukiyo-e artist Hokusai; and Figure 12 is blended in ramen or udon.

Contrary to the dynamic nature of the narrative process, the conceptual process is more stable and it represents participants in terms of types, structure, and meaning. In general, conceptual process can be classified into three sub-processes, namely classificational process including the participant relations between the subordinate and super-ordinate, analytical process including the participant relations between the carrier (the whole) and the possessive attributes (the parts), and symbolic process establish the meaning and identity and include the carrier and the symbolic attribute (Kress & Leuween, 2006). That's why it can be seen in static conceptual images.

From 14 meme images, static conceptual images can be found in Figure 2, Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 13, and Figure 14. With regard to the conceptual process, the most prominent one is the symbolic aspect. The symbolic process in some memes show that amabie as main focus as the symbolic attribute in the carrier. The carrier in question is there are medium used to visualize amabie, such as sculpture of amabie in Figure 6; embroidery of amabie in Figure 8; and the arm to depict amabie as a tattoo in Figure 14. However, other memes is depicted through drawing or painting such as in Figure 2, Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 7, and Figure 13.

Interactive Meaning

Interactive meaning relates to viewer position used for interacting with others, showing feelings, attitudes, credibility and power relationship. The relationship being built between an image and the viewer. This relationship will be visible as the communicative function of an image which is realized through three types of systems, namely image act-and-gaze, social distance, as well as power relations.

First, the system of image act and gaze is related to the position or gaze of the image is direct or indirect. The direct position or gaze of the image is demanding interaction or visual contact with the viewer. It called the demand position or gaze. Otherwise, the indirect position or gaze of the image is offering viewer the role of observer, which has no visual contact. It called the offer position or gaze. From 14 meme images, the system of image and gaze with no visual contact (offer) is the most prominent one. It can be understand that the eyeline of the amabie in 12 meme images are looking sideways to the viewer. Meanwhile, the system of image and gaze with visual contact with the viewer (the demand) can be found only in Figure 5 and Figure 12. It can be understand that the eyeline of amabie in two meme images are looking straight forward to the viewer. Therefore, the eyeline of two amabie in Figure 5 and 12 have 'demand' for the viewer to look up those memes.

Furthermore, the system of social distance is related to the extent of the degree of intimacy under the shot type, namely close-up shot, medium shot, and long shot. The close-up shot which signifies intimacy usually shows of face or head and shoulder

of the participants. The medium shot which signifies objects being within the reach of a viewer shows the upper half of a participants. The long shot which signifies impersonal relation shows the whole body of the participants. The degree of intimacy is determined by represented participants appear to the viewer in an image.

From 14 meme images, the system of social distance that showed close-up shot can be found in Figure 9 and Figure 12. It can be seen that only amabie's head appears in two meme images. Furthermore, the system of social distance that showed medium shot can be found only in Figure 1 and Figure 3. It can be seen that the the participant in two meme images show upper half of the body of amabie. Meanwhile, the system of social distance that showed long shot is the most prominent one. It can be found in Figure 2, Figure, 4, Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 13, and Figure 14. It can be understood that 10 meme images show the whole body of amabie.

Lastly, the system of power relations which included in involvement and power involves the way participants are positioned along the horizontal and the vertical angles. The horizontal angle shows involvement or detachment which has two type of angle, namely frontal angle involves maximum involvement, and oblique angle signifies minimum involvement or maximum detachment. On the other hand, the vertical angle expresses power relations which has three type of angle, namely high angle signifies power, low angle signifies vulnerability, and eye level signifies equality.

From 14 meme images, the system of power relations with horizontal angles can be found in Figure 1 and Figure 3. From two type of horizontal angle, there is only oblique angle showed in two meme images. It can be understood that the participant of amabie looks down to other participant, such as the crow in Figure 1, and the man in Figure 3. On the other hand, the system of power relation with vertical angles is the most prominent one. It can be found in Figure 2, Figure 4, and until Figure 14. However, from three type of vertical angle, eye-level angle is the most prominent one. It can be found in Figure 1 until Figure 8, and Figure 12 until Figure 14. Meanwhile, high angle can be found in Figure 9 and Figure 10. It can be understood that the viewer are above than the participant of amabie. It can be showed that amabie in Figure 9 only appear its head from the pond. It also showed that amabie in Figure 10 lay down in the ground. Lastly, low angle can be found only in Figure 11. It can be understood that the viewer are from below which amabie in Figure 11 was jumped out from the sea.

Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning relates the representational and interactive meanings of the image to each other through interrelated systems, namely information value, salience, and framing (Kress & Leuween, 2006). First, the information value relates to certain values are given to images based on the placement of elements in a composition. The placement of elements provides them with particular informational values related to the different zones of an image, such as left, right, top, bottom, and center. It is called centered composition if it has an element placed at the center, and polarized composition if it does not have any element placed at the center.

From 14 meme images, the information value with centered composition is the most prominent one. It can be found in Figure 2, Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure

7, Figure 8, Figure 12, Figure 13, and Figure 14. It can be understood that the position of amabie is located in the center of image. Meanwhile, the other memes are included as the information value with various polarized composition, such as top, left, left-top, bottom, and right-top. The top polarization can be found in Figure 1, which amabie's position is located in the top of image. Furthermore, the left polarization can be found in Figure 3, which amabie's position is located in the left of image. Next, the left-top polarization can be found in Figure 9, which amabie's position is located in the left-top of image. On the other hand, the bottom polarization can be found in Figure 10, which amabie's position is located in the bottom of image. Lastly, the right-top polarization can be found in Figure 11, which amabie's position is located in the right-top of image.

Second, the salience creates a hierarchy of importance among the elements, selecting some as more worthy of attention than others. The salience also attract the attention of the viewer with varying degrees, as realized by factors such as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in colour, difference in sharpness or the way it overlaps with other elements in the composition.

From 14 meme images, the salience of background or foreground can be found in Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11. It can be understood that there is the pond as foreground in Figure 9, the hill as background in Figure 10, also the wave as foreground and the mountain as background in Figure 11. Furthermore, the salience of size can be found in Figure 1 and Figure 3. It can be understood that the huge size of amabie compared with the crows in Figure 1, and the tallest of amabie compared with the man in Figure 3. Meanwhile, the salience of colour can be distinguished into two types, namely black-grey-white, and colourful. The black-grey-white type can be found in Figure 1, Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 7, and Figure 14. On the other hand, the colourful type can be found in Figure 2, Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12, and Figure 13. Lastly, the salience of sharpness is the most prominent one, except the sharpness of amabie image in Figure 9 is unsharpness.

Lastly, the framing implies the degree certain elements are visually separated from each other through the use of frame lines, empty space between these elements or other framing devices. Framing is usually helpful in defining information value. The absence ore presence of framing devices such as dividing lines either connect or disconnect the different elements in an image, thus denoting whether such element belong or do not belong together in certain way.

From 14 meme images, the framing of image can be found that the way amabie's size and position and the craw overlap in Figure 1, or the empty space in Figure 2, Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6, which no other elements are visible.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the prominent aspect from 14 meme images of amabie are the conceptual process as representational meaning; the indirect position or gaze, long shot, and vertical angle as interactive meaning; the centered composition, the

placement in foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in colour, difference in sharpness as salience; and, the use of frame lines and empty space of framing as compositional meaning. All these aspect reflected that amabie was truly a savior to protect Japanese people from COVID-19 pandemic.

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