

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of The Study

Semiotics as a field of study deals with the complex area of signs, symbols, and the interpretation in human communication and cultures that is rooted in linguistics, philosophy, and sociology. Semiotics provides an understanding on how meaning is created, communicated, and understood through various interactions that human have. At its core, semiotics is the questions of how symbols and signs function as means of communication and how it can influence the cultural interactions.

The origins of semiotics date back to people such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Saussure emphasized the that language functions through the relationship between the signifier (the physical form of the sign) and the signified (the concept or meaning conveyed by the sign). On the other hand, Peirce expanded the scope of semiotics by introducing the concept of semiotics, the process of interpreting signs, which he viewed as dynamic entities with the potential to create meaning through continuous cycles of interpretation, and emphasized the triadic relationship between sign, object, and interpreter. Semiotics includes a wide range of sign systems, including visual symbols, gestures, rituals, and cultural artifacts that go beyond spoken and written language.

Semiotics focuses on the diverse sign systems, ranging from visual symbols and gestures to rituals and cultural artifacts, transcending spoken and written language. This broad approach enables semioticians to analyze how symbols function across different contexts and cultural milieus, unveiling underlying patterns of meaning-making and communication. On the current year, symbols and images that are seen by publics eye are something called Internet Memes. Internet memes are considered

to be one of the forms of evolution of semiotic that Saussure and Peirce were talking about.

At its core, internet memes can be traced back to the concept of meme introduced by a British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book titled *The Selfish Gene*. Memes are often regarded by linguists as a form of communication that human has been using since they evolved to convey words with messages.

According to Dawkins (1976), a "meme" was analogous to a "phoneme," the smallest unit of sound in speech, or a "morpheme," the smallest meaningful subunit of a word. The roots of the term "meme" in linguistics reflect an intriguing relationship of words and concepts. While the word meme is originally a Greek, Dawkins coined it more into the French word "même," which means "same," alluded to the core concept of memes as units that multiply and copy, effectively passing on shared cultural knowledge or behaviors. Furthermore, Dawkins' reference to the French term "même" and its relationship with "memory" adds another layer of significance to the concept, implying that memes are about more than merely reproduction, but also conserving and transferring cultural memories and ideas between generations. This linguistic study highlights the diversity and depth of the term "meme," which reflects the complexities of the cultural occurrences it covers. It emphasizes how language and etymology are connected with idea conceptualization, and how a single word may embody fundamental understandings into the nature of human civilization and communication.

While Dawkins' interpretation of meme was used in by many as the basis of their own study, it was pretty clear that it is an outdated term because Dawkins clearly wouldn't know that memes will explode in popularity that a GIF of a spinning cat named Maxwell can be considered a meme because people find it cute and share the meme to their friends and family.

According Nugroho (2020), Stuart Hall's representation of meaning is formed and shared between one person to another in a society via language, signs, and images that can represent something or a condition. It is best described as

anything that can represent or reflect a culture, which is the case to memes as they have a mimicry effect that mirrors real life as a growing society. Hall also makes a point that an image or a sign can and will have multiple interpretations and meaning depending on the beholder and there's no way to make sure that it will be interpreted as how the creator meant it to be taken (as the case of satirical meme or grotesque parody).

On the other hand, Limor Shifman offered an extensive memes theory, highlighting memes' importance in online culture as well as their potential to transfer cultural knowledge through absurd or relevant material. Shifman explains how memes can be defined as “the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet” (Shifman, 2014).

In the modern era, memes have become more than just humorous images – they've evolved into tools for spreading ideas and opinions, almost like a form of propaganda. The notable surge in meme usage during the challenging year of 2020, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting a closer look. This study aimed at understanding how internet memes are interpreted and understood in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher seeks to explore the semiotic elements embedded within internet memes, examining how cultural symbols, signs, and humor are employed to convey meaning and reflect societal attitudes. Through qualitative method of analysis, the study aims to delve into the nuances of meme interpretation, uncovering underlying themes, patterns, and shifts in semiotic discourse post-pandemic. By exploring the semiotic dimensions of internet memes, the research seeks to offer insights into the evolving nature of online communication and cultural expression in the wake of global crisis.

However, to set this study apart from previous research, the shift of focus has been made to the post-pandemic period. Instead of rehashing discussions about the immediate impact of memes during the crisis, this study aims to explore their lasting effects, how well they facilitate conversations, and predict their future role in human culture.

The decision to concentrate on the post-pandemic period addresses a void in existing research. While numerous studies have scrutinized memes' effectiveness

during the pandemic, there is a conspicuous lack of understanding regarding their aftermath. This study aims to fill that void, recognizing the evolving landscape of meme culture and its continued influence on societal communication.

The chosen timeframe is deliberate, aiming to provide insights into how memes persistently shape conversations and influence communication dynamics in the aftermath of a global crisis. Memes are acknowledged as cultural artifacts reflecting societal attitudes long after the events to which they initially responded have transpired. The goal is not only to analyze the effects of memes after the pandemic but also to examine their effectiveness as communication tools. The exploration will encompass how memes contribute to conversations, acting as vehicles for humor, critique, and the expression of complex emotions. The overarching objective is to offer a comprehensive understanding of memes as dynamic instruments extending beyond their immediate contexts, continuing to play a pivotal role in shaping human interaction and culture long after the crisis has subsided.

While the current study has been started since the end of 2023, there was another study done by Jose A Flecha and his peers back in 2020 regarding internet memes and Covid-19, although the memes they gathered were in Spanish and is considered to be outdated by today's standard. It also didn't consider the human variable and social culture that the variable may affecting. The study also acknowledged that due to the novelty of this subject, that being COVID-19 and internet memes surrounding it, there is a limited amount of library to with in order to make a further review for this subject.

This is also one of the issues that the current study is also facing, although to a lesser degree thanks to researchers like Jose and other researchers. Despite of these issues, Jose's study is still usable as part of previously conducted study and will certainly help with making future conclusion and helps bridge the data that the English memes and Spanish memes had provided but still lacking due the existent language barrier.

On the side note, a collection of approximately 50 memes provided by "Know Your meme website", spanning from January 2023 to May 2024 will be used as the

primary preliminary data. The analysis technique consisting of finding meme pictures for each type, analyzing the punchline, transcribing and making interpretations, checking the "Know Your Meme" website for feedback, and drawing conclusions based on related memes before making further notes. Other pages from the site will also be added if further information is needed.

#### **1.4 Problems of The Study**

1. What makes internet memes so popular in the cyber world?
2. How are internet memes being interpreted by netizens in the online community?
3. Why are some interpretations of internet memes were used the way they are and others in a different way?

#### **1.5 Objectives of The Study**

1. To explore the reason as to what spurs the popularity of internet memes in the cyber world.
2. To examine how internet memes being interpreted by netizens in the online community.
3. To understand the reason why some interpretations of internet memes were used the way they are while others are being used in a different way.

#### **1.6 Scopes of The Study**

This study focuses on online memes as a semiotic tool after the COVID-19 pandemic. It will mostly rely on memes and associated information available on the internet, with particular focus on sources gathered from "Know Your Meme". Given that the study depends on internet sources on a specific timeframe (that being the start January 2023 towards the end of May 2024), it acknowledges the risk of the content becoming irrelevant over time and when this study is published. Some statistics will also be provided as to give indication of when the specific meme

trended in the internet. To help narrow the search of these memes, the data received will be examine through “Know Your Meme” website as it provides further analysis done beforehand by other people, to a certain degree.

### **1.7 Significances of The Study**

The findings of this study are expected to be useful in the future, both theoretically and practically.

1. Practically, this study will be shedding light on how symbols, cultural references, and humor convey meaning and societal views in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Theoritically, this study will be providing important insights on the role of internet memes as a distinct form of semiotic discourse in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic.

