Laughing at one’s self: A study of self-reflective internet memes

A A T Kariko¹ and N Anasih¹

¹English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta, Indonesia 11480
aziz_comи@binus.ac.id; nonnyanasih@gmail.com

Abstract. Internet memes are a part of the popular culture worldwide. These memes can be easily found in various social media platforms. This analysis further explores internet memes as expression tool to mimic or mock one’s situation. The analyzed memes are internet memes that have been circulating for the past years and are still used today. This study was conducted using the postmodern psychology theory along with a survey on internet memes and mental state. The analysis found that internet memes can be divided into three categories of self-reflective memes based on the postmodern psychology theory. All three categories believe in the existence of the other “self”, another part of a human that cannot be separated but is different than the person. Some of the categories reference the mental health issues that the users may have. The study also found that 70% of college students in Jakarta have experienced anxiety and/or depression symptoms while 47% of these students believe that looking at self-reflective internet memes help ease their symptoms.

1. Introduction
Internet meme is a worldwide phenomenon that takes the form of image, video, and gif that spreads for humorous purpose on the internet. Every country has its own memes that mimics, even makes fun of, the current trends. Meme is a cultural aspect that explains how rumors, catchphrases, melodies, or fashion trends replicate through population [1]. Nowadays, the topic of internet memes ranges from self-mockery to politics.

More often than not, internet meme is a combination of image and text that reflect situation that the maker or sender would like to express. One example is the evil Kermit meme that was viral at the end of 2016. This particular meme portrays the duality a person, similar with what Postmodernists believe. This analysis will explore the internet memes that reflect the multiple personas of humans using the postmodern psychology theory.

2. Theoretical Background
Internet memes can be classified as the popular culture of this generation. Although memes have been around since decades ago, the impact of internet memes has never been stronger than now. The popular culture of the postmodern condition is a culture where taste is irrelevant [2]. Internet meme can be in the form of short video (e.g., Vine), a screenshot of a cartoon (e.g., Spongebob Squarepants), or even a stranger (e.g., Gavin). The function of internet memes is not to stimulate the aesthetic sense of human but rather to mimic life in the most absurd way possible.
The difference of postmodernism and modernism is in the following: For the postmodernist, by contrast, fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief [3]. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it.

Postmodernism opposes the distinction between “high” and “popular” art while supports the gaudiness in “bad taste” mixtures of qualities [3]. The theory of postmodernism supports the quality of internet memes as part of the pop culture that combines humor with impersonation.

Postmodern psychology is a division of postmodernism that correlates with self-identity of human psyche. The definition is simplified into a concept that believes all ideas about human reality are socially constructed [4]. This theory adapts the concept that humans are products of culture, meaning that the persona of humans are constructed by the society that they live in. It is up to the humans themselves how they conform to the culture.

People on the internet may behave differently in the real world but that does not suggest that one of their persona is false; it simply suggests that humans are very complex in terms of personalities. Internet memes are the appropriate tools for identity building and public discourse. What differentiates internet memes from other memes is the fact that internet meme consists of specific theme and format. People use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity [5]. In other words, each meme can be personified by the maker, but the relatable content of the meme is what makes internet memes viral.

As the meme culture progresses, it becomes more prominent that most memes use mental health issues as the core messages. These memes are very popular as a lot of people can relate with the memes. Mental illness themed memes are used to repress the symptoms and act as a defense mechanism for the users. By laughing and joking about the memes, they share their everyday struggles and symptoms to others on the internet. Depressed or anxious people used social media to lessen their symptoms because they may have troubles interacting with people face-to-face [6].

3. Discussion
The discussion section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection contains study about types of self-reflective memes using postmodern psychology theory. The second subsection includes the data from a conducted survey about internet memes and mental state. The memes presented in these two subsections are self-reflective memes which mimic or make fun of one’s self.

3.1. Categories of self-reflective memes
The memes presented in this subsection are memes which reflect the belief that humans have different multiple “selves.” The memes are divided into three categories, which are the dual nature, the self-judgment, and the dual image. These internet memes correlate with the theory postmodern psychology where the two different selves can interact with each other and be completely different.

The first category is the dual nature internet meme. The meme is named as “the evil Kermit” meme. The original meme is in figure 1. Based on figure 1, the meme itself acknowledges the presence of the other “self” as the person (written as ‘me’) is being influenced by the other “self” (written as ‘other me’). The format of this evil Kermit meme is a text consisting of dialogue between the person and the other “self” in which the other “self” influences the person. The text is accompanied by the image of two Kermit. The other “self” motivates the person to do the inappropriate action when the person is faced with a certain situation. This meme accepts the concept that humans have multiple persona, one is the immoral side of themselves and is part of the whole nature.
Figure 1. The dual nature.

The second category is the self-judgment meme. The self-judgment meme is the type of meme that portrays the other “self” judging one’s self. The original meme can be seen in figure 2.

Figure 2. The self-judgment.

This type of meme has a format consists of the text that is spoken by one’s self and image of a person pointing to his/her reflection with the text “why are you like this.” Figure 2 is the original meme in which a Caucasian man pointing at his reflection while smiling with the text “why are you like this.” This meme in figure 2 expresses disappointment of the other “self”, which is an undivided part of one’s self, towards the person. The text tells the internal monologue of one’s self that is the source of disappointment. This meme is different from the evil Kermit meme as the other “self” is portrayed to have the same physical appearance as the person in the form of reflection while the evil Kermit meme portrays the other “self” to have different attributes to distinct itself from the person.

The other category is the dual image meme. The dual image contains pictures of the same person with different, often in total opposite, images/behavior/personality. This type of meme often references the bipolar disease due to its portrayal of a person with two different characteristics within the same
timeline. The other “self” is not interacting with the person in this meme. However, the other “self” is pictured to fully express itself and be free from the person.

Figure 3. The dual image.

In figure 3, the meme contains two pictures of the same woman. The two pictures are accompanied by two different captions. In picture 1, the woman is seen to be devastated and not wearing any makeup, accompanied with the caption “i’m so stressed i’m literally gonna b ugly forever i’m only getting uglier now.” Meanwhile, the woman in picture 2 can be seen to be confident and wearing makeup, accompanied with the caption “have u ever seen such beauty.”

The copy of the meme consists of comparison between two images of one person in different timeline. Identical with the dual nature meme, the dual image meme presents the other “self” with the same physique. However, the other “self” is dressed differently compared to the person and in a physical form instead of a reflection. What differentiates the dual image meme and the dual nature meme is the timeline. In the dual image meme, the other “self” exists in different timeline.

3.2. Internet memes and mental state

As presented in the previous subsection, some of the self-reflective memes reference mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. In discovering the relation between self-reflective internet memes and mental state, a survey on internet memes and mental state was conducted. There are 133 respondents from major universities in Jakarta. This subsection reveals the result of the survey and presents the effects of self-reflective internet memes on state of mind.

Table 1. Frequency of memes usage.

| Frequency   | Female | Male |
|-------------|--------|------|
| 1 (not at all) | 6      | 6    |
| 2 (rarely)   | 18     | 13   |
| 3 (sometimes)| 24     | 15   |
| 4 (frequently)| 15    | 14   |
| 5 (all the time) | 13 | 9    |

The highest numbers of frequency are in level 3 which means that 39 respondents use internet memes occasionally. 31 students claim to rarely use internet memes while 29 respondents frequently use memes. 21 students claim to use internet memes all the time and only 12 students admit to never use internet memes. This data proves that the vast majority of students use internet memes instead of only looking at them. From the survey, the respondents mostly get the internet memes via social media.

60% of the respondents agree that the favorite aspect of internet memes is humor whereas 30% of the respondents enjoy the relatability of internet memes. 7% of respondents claim to like the aesthetic of internet memes and only 4% chose other aspects. In this survey question, the respondents were allowed to pick more than one favorite aspects. With this data, it is apparent that humor is the favorite aspect of internet memes.
aspect of internet memes. Table 2 shows the favorite aspects of internet memes according to the respondents.

**Table 2.** Favorite aspects of memes.

| Favorite aspects | Total |
|------------------|-------|
| Humor            | 117   |
| Relatability     | 59    |
| Aesthetic        | 13    |
| Other            | 7     |

The main three types of internet memes are divided by topics. The self-deprecating memes are memes that make fun of one’s self and not make fun of other people. Depressing memes are the type of memes that joke and/or reference depression along with other mental health issues. The wholesome memes are the memes that contain positive message. Usually the topics are self love, friendship, family, and love. Table 3 shows the types of meme that respondents use the most.

**Table 3.** Most used memes.

| Types of memes | Total |
|----------------|-------|
| Self-deprecating | 59    |
| Depressing      | 28    |
| Wholesome       | 26    |
| Other           | 20    |

The most used memes are the self-deprecating memes. The second memes that are widely used by the respondents are depressing memes. Wholesome memes are used by 19% of the respondents while 20 respondents chose other kinds of memes. The rest of respondents put other kinds of memes which include funny memes, sarcastic memes, and all kinds of memes. Small numbers of respondents claim that they never use memes and never pay attention to what kind of memes that they enjoy. In table 4, the data shows the number of respondents who have experienced anxiety and/or depression symptoms.

**Table 4.** Anxiety attacks and/or depression symptoms.

| Claim                | Total |
|----------------------|-------|
| Yes, I do            | 33    |
| Yes, but not often   | 61    |
| No, I do not         | 39    |

71% of respondents have experienced anxiety and/or depression symptoms. 46% of the respondents claim that they have experienced them occasionally. 29% of the respondents have never experienced anxiety and/or depression symptoms in their lives. This data proves that more than half of the college students in Jakarta have mental health issues. This correlates with the previous data as the top two most used memes are self-deprecating and depressing memes. Students who claim to have anxiety and/or depression symptoms tend to prefer the dark memes (self-deprecating and depressing memes) as these memes poke fun at their situations.

**Table 5.** Do memes help ease the symptoms?

| Claim      | Total |
|------------|-------|
| Yes, it does | 62    |
| No, it does not | 71    |
Table 5 shows that 53% of the respondents admit that internet memes do not help ease their anxiety and/or depression symptoms. 29 respondents part of the 53% have never experienced anxiety and/or depression symptoms whereas 10 of the respondents who have never experienced anxiety and/or depression symptoms assume that internet memes help ease the symptoms of anxiety and depression. 47% claim that internet memes help ease symptoms which are caused by anxiety and depression. This data proves that almost half of the students agree that internet memes calm their anxiety attacks and/or depression symptoms by simply helping them laugh at their mental health issues.

4. Conclusion
There are three categories of self-reflective internet memes that embedded the values of postmodern psychology. The postmodern psychology believes that human has multiple persona and none of them can be claimed as false. The first category is dual nature that expresses the influence of the other “self” towards the person. The self-judgment memes mimic the ability of other “self” to judge or disagree with the person. The dual image memes imply the presence of other “self” in different timeline.

The survey shows that 70% of college students in Jakarta have experienced anxiety attacks and/or depression symptoms. This supports the rise of self-deprecating and depressing memes on the internet. With the high amount of students who have anxiety or depression, self-deprecating and depressing memes or otherwise known as dark memes become the most used memes according to the 133 respondents. These respondents value the humor within the memes as well as the relatability that self-reflective internet memes are able to present. These dark memes connect people who have similar situations while also making fun of the situations.

47% of the respondents agree that looking at memes help ease their anxiety attacks and/or depression symptoms. With the humor and relatability that internet memes provide, these students are able to cope with their mental health issues by laughing at their problems. In doing so, they have the platform to communicate about the mental state and connect with others who experience the same problems.

In conclusion, self-reflective memes are the most used memes as these memes provide relatability along with humor. People prefer to make fun of themselves instead of others as they can be assured that many others have been under similar situations. By categorizing self-reflective memes into three groups, it can be concluded that these internet memes have similar format and the same goal. The goal is to laugh at one’s struggles along with mental issues.

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