

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Nowadays, the expansion of communication has implications for the enormous area of symbolic media that has developed over the past few decades. Post modernism created technologies that involved in our daily social interaction. But even in this modern advance, the concept of communication still remains at its root, as Ross (1983) states that communication is a process of the speaker sending symbols that can be understood by the one who hears. This concept of sending symbols is also refers to semiotics. Based on a book named *A Theory of Semiotics*, it stated that semiotics is everything related to sign. In a way, sign is something that mean something else (Eco, 1979). Eco often call this theory as the theory of deception because it can mislead people. This mislead potential can be tackled through expanding semiotics into something more specific, perhaps a theory branch, or as simple as a different perspective. Luckily enough, there are a lot of linguists who have proposed their own theory in order to explore this vast ocean, namely, semiotics.

One of the early basis of semiotics was proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. In the early development, he did a research on how signs function in society as the purpose of his theory of language since semiotics largely borrows from linguistic principles (Saussure, 1983). This theory keep expanding until he finally invented the idea of signifier and signified, which was born from the concept of sign. Saussure notes that it is impossible to have a full meaningless

signifier or a fully formless signified, as sign requires both a signifier and a signified. The idea here is that, sign is more than merely a name-to-name connection. It is between a concept or idea as a signified, and a sound pattern. When it comes to sign as a vessel of human communication, there are two aspects existed within every sign that convey meaning within them. Those are verbal and visual signs in which, each of these has a signifier and is signified on them. As a sign that conveys meaning within them, it is also necessary to understand how meaning can be interpreted. Barthes has his perspective about meaning where he extended Saussure's theory into connotation and denotation (Barthes, 1964). With all of this connection, semiotics can also be described as a theoretical approach to the science of signs which develop a way in which signs function, manifest and expressed in social interaction. Therefore, signs can be easily recognized through many different mediums such as words, images, sounds, gestures, objects or even memes.

When it comes to meme, the early definition itself was introduced on '*The Selfish Gene*', a book by Richard Dawkins. He suggests that a noun replicator that conveys a cultural idea of imitation should have a name that he believed would represent the linkage between culture (Dawkins, 1976). He later decided to cite a word from ancient Greek language that he modified into a shortened word version, which later known as meme. After understanding the brief origin of meme, notice that the definition between the Dawkins' meme and the nowadays internet meme are slightly different. Dawkins even acknowledged this fact by calling it out that, The concept of meme has undergone changes and taken on new

meanings. The internet meme, which relies on human creativity, appropriates the original idea rather than evolving into something random. The Dawkins theory as the essential elements are still present in this new form, while the mutations can still evolve. This modern version of meme is known as internet memes.

Nowadays the Internet meme adapt by enhance its media into the digital medium as one of the type of online communication genre that represent the modern culture. It uses digital alteration approach e.g; Adobe, meme generator, etc to created images of memes that shared norms and values within the society (Shifman, 2013). Obviously, not every internet memes are heavily attached to complex discourses. Nowadays, people around the world used internet meme as their daily dopamine releases. Instead of complex discourses, the status quo moves the internet meme as something that can be consumed daily by its audience since internet meme can also be entertaining to look at. Even if the internet meme can only be seen as entertainment, it does not mean that internet meme has lost it essence since in internet meme, certain message is still exist as the meaning or idea. This implies that in order to enjoy internet memes, common knowledge is still needed in order to understand the comedic value or cultural message of the internet meme.

The platform to find internet meme itself is various. The common one is on Instagram, where there are a lot of accounts that provide daily internet memes. One of the famous account from Instagram who provided these internet memes is *9gag*, a meme account that has posted over thirty thousands of internet memes and has reached over fifty eight millions of followers on the day this study

conducted. This account gained popularity because their internet meme can reach the general viewers using their casual internet meme that can be easily digested as their feeds. This shows that these internet memes from 9gag is following the status quo where their internet memes can be understood without understanding complex discourses. Because of the numerous amount of meme on 9gag's Instagram account, there are many types of meme formats that can be found on the internet. Those are such as video, picture, or text. Not only the media, internet meme tend to have their own formula that netizen tend to call as a meme format. One of the most common format of the internet meme is a text display meme.

A text display meme is a typical format of internet meme that is easy to find. It consists of two elements, a text on top with a picture on the bottom. This type of meme format is the specific data that are applied for this study since, this meme format resembles signs. The theoretical proof behind this on how, text display meme has the text as the verbal sign and the image as the visual sign. This successfully shows that internet meme is also considered as a sign. Therefore, with this in mind, this study become acceptable to be analyzed.

Now, the reasons why this study is interesting is because internet memes are consumed by a huge amount of people either direct or indirectly. In the current society, internet meme has a solid existence in the internet. But unfortunately, in post modernism, most people cannot even see internet meme as a serious matter that can be discussed formally. This is an irony considering the fact that back on the day when Dawkins firstly declare his proposal on meme, meme turned into a

complex discourse that let people to actually learn about the society's behaviour through cultural imitation. Internet meme still served its purpose that way though, but the direction is clearly shifting. By doing this study on how it combined academical writing with internet meme, at least these mass netizen can get a 'not so new' insight on what meme actually is more than they think as it is now. Therefore it is necessary to somehow communicate to the society regarding to this concern. In addition, when the society got the awareness from this issue, many people would surely appreciate more of the internet meme that they consumed daily.

## 1.2 Problems of the Study

The problems of the study are based on the context of the study focus on addressing two key concerns.

1. What are the verbal and visual signs within the selected memes from *9gag* ?
2. What are the connotative and denotative meaning behind these selected memes from *9gag* ?

## 1.3 Objectives of the Study

The goal of the study is to analyze the meaning of the selected memes from *9gag*'s Instagram account which led by the provided research methods.

In short, the objectives should be conducted as:

1. To identify and categorize the verbal and visual signs within the selected memes from *9gag*.
2. To analyze the connotative and denotative meaning within the selected internet memes from *9gag*.

#### **1.4 Limitation of the Study**

The current study used the text display meme format from *9gag*'s Instagram account as the data of this study but, keep in mind that the amount of the meme that being analyzed must be limited into certain quantity since the meme from *9gag* has over thirty thousand of internet memes from their feed that they post daily. These internet memes were extracted from 2022 until 2023 in order to maintain the relevancy and the freshness of the data quality. The theory used in order to analyze the data come from the guidance of Saussure's and Barthes' theory. The theory from Saussure used to analyze the signifier and signified within the selected internet memes which constructed by verbal and visual sign. Meanwhile the theory from Barthes used to interpreted the meaning within these internet memes by separating them into connotation and denotation.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

There are two main concerns in formulating the significance of this study which are constructed as follows.

### **1.5.1 Theoretical Significance**

The current study brought benefits in theoretical perspective. It provides better understanding regarding semiotics field. Especially, verbal and visual analysis as a sign and meaning interpretation within the selected memes from *9gag*'s Instagram account in theoretical perspective. Moreover, this study works as the first step bridge for the boring gap between academic and enthusiastic discourse about internet memes. This study believes that internet users are on to something, and researchers should follow the progression within this digital society. Hopefully, this insight can inspire more researcher to be flexible with their data source as to progress and innovate more when it comes to academical writing.

### **1.5.2 Practical Significance**

Practically, this study gives better understanding on how to analyze an informal data such as internet meme using formal method such as academical writing. This unique perspective is not only designed to be learned by academic figure but also certain group within the society with same interest to the data of this study. This study also gives better understanding on how to logically analyzed internet memes which would create more realization as how other people interpreted meme differently that can be developed into a healthy discussion within the vast society.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW RELATED LITERATURE, CONCEPTS AND THEORIES**

In this chapter, some of the older studies in different variables were provided in order to achieve better accuracy for the sake of this study. Not only review, gap of the study also provided in this segment. All of them must be related to the linguistic field especially about the main theory of the study which are sign and meaning. Not only review from some previous studies, there are also be some concepts and theories as well. This segment should give most of the general understanding of the major keywords on this study that consists of general ideas and definitions. By this on set, it should give the basic knowledge to understand this study even more.

#### **2.1 Review of Related Literature**

As the matter of validation and reference for this study, similar topics were presented as related literature in order to provide reviews between both studies. The selected previous studies must cover meme as the main data for every previous studies that were showcased in order to have clear parameters and fair comparative analysis. By having this common similarities between this study and previous studies, consistency within the review would be achieved as well. There are five references that were presented in this study. In order to tidy up everything, it would be way better to sort these previous studies based on the type. In this case, this literature review should start from articles which then followed by the other thesis.



The first article came from Putra, etc (2017) entitled *Semiotic Analysis of Four Popular Memes in Memecenter.com*. Using three theories, including Saussure's theory of semiotics for the signifier and signified, this previous study sought to explore the purpose and descriptions of memes. Additionally, the Hymes' S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model and Pierce's theory of signs are utilized in order to give understanding on how memes behave and how they describe in particular contexts. This previous study analyzed some meme formats such as Oh God, Poker face, Forever Alone, and Fuu. The similarities of this previous study with this current study is that, both studies are on the same boat on aiming the signifier and signified within memes to be determined. Both study also uses Saussure's semiotic theory. However, the differences of the study also exist in the theory scope. Unlike the theories from previous study, which employed Pierce and Hymes, while the current one makes use of Saussure and Barthes. This also shows the different quantity of the theory used. This previous study used over three theories while this current study only uses two when it comes to analyzing the data. Speaking of data, this previous study analyzed some meme formats that they claimed as meme. Those meme formats are Oh God, Poker face, Forever Alone, and Fuu. Meanwhile, this current study only use one format which is a text display memes.

Now, people who did not quite understand about meme might think that meme and meme formats are supposed to be the same thing but, note to self that meme format and meme itself is different substance since meme format is a formula to create more meme from them. Let us say in the analogy of music

world, meme format may be equivalent to a genre of music, therefore to put it simply memes are born from a meme format that is why it is a two different things. Another thing worth mentioning is that, this previous article used *memecenter.com* while in the current study uses *9 gag*.

The second article for this review came from an article entitled *Semiotics Analysis on Historical Memes in Eno Bening's Tweet Replies* by Dewanto & Cahyono (2021). This previous study focused on exploring the meaning of tweet replies from a Twitter account called Eno Bening that contain a meme genre called historical meme. The similarities that came from both of these study are: first, the method used was the same, which was a qualitative method. The topic was also generally focused on memes, and both studies also aimed to investigate the interpretation of memes. Meanwhile, the differences came from the media where the previous study extracted their data from Twitter while the current study used Instagram. The format of meme that were analyzed is also different. The previous study used a historical meme while the current study used display text meme. In addition, the theory featured is also different, where this previous study used Pierce's theory while the current study used Saussure's and Barthes' theory.

The third one is a thesis called *A Semiotics Analysis of Memes in Pinterest Application* by Abrahams (2021). This study aims to explore the verbal and visual sign which combine with the analysis of the function of the sign. There are some similarities. First, both studies aims to find meaning within memes. Secondly, both studies also aims to analyze the verbal and visual sign. The

theory quantity is also similar; both studies relies upon Barthes' and Saussure's theory. There is only one major difference ; it was the fact that the previous thesis extracted the data from Pinterest, while the current study went for *9gag*.

The forth one is a thesis entitled *A Semiotics Analysis in Instagram Meme 9gag* by Hadipuro (2019). The previous study aims to fin meaning behind meme from *9gag*. The previous study used Saussure's and Pierce's theory in order to do so. There are some similarities here. First, both studies uses *9gag* as their source to collect the data. The second similarities is that, both studies aims the same goal of describing meaning within memes. However, there are also some remarkable differences. First, the timeline of both studies are conducted differently the previous study was conducted on 2019 while the current study revisit similar matter in 2022. The theories are also different, the previous study used Saussure's and Pierce's theory while the current study uses Saussure's and Barthes' theory. This implies that there is an expanded perspective and study results that are different from previous study. In a way, the current study provided the updated analysis format that pushed forward the development of this field.

The last contributor for this review segment came from a thesis by Murtaisah (2020) that entitled *Semiotics Analysis of Meme for Woman at @9gaggirly Instagram Account* which seek out the interpretation within memes. When it comes to similarities, some are quite obvious. First, both studies aims to examines the interpretation of meaning within the meme. Secondly, both of the studies use meme as the main topic of interest, which is also combined with the

concept of semiotics as the theory. On the other hand, the differences were found where the previous study depended on Pierce's theory while in the current study, Saussure's and Barthes' theory were used. Another notice-able difference came from the web page. Since interestingly enough, the previous study did not used the same *9gag* since judging by the name, it is most likely that the page that being used by the previous study was a *9gag* variant focused on a meme that is specifically dedicated to women and not to general audience.

There are obviously gaps that can be found in this study compared to what has been reviewed above in order to extend the previous study while also achieving a bolder purpose in the context of academic writing. This study was crafted to aim for a more general audience while also still keeping the balance for typical formal academic discussion to remain enjoyable through simplified concept from the expert, compared to the other study that tend to use literal terminology within the book theory without explaining in a more simple way as the early gate to understand the basic concept of semiotic, especially sign-through meme as the fun tool to encourage the millennial that has been influenced on the recent development of modern communication. This study provided more understanding and perhaps clarifications toward some misunderstanding of knowledge regarding the idea of meme that are unfortunately being found in other author's study. Even though this is could be count as common misconception since after all this research being done by a person who is more familiar to the linguistic aspect rather than meme but as the main subject, meme should not be taken lightly. This study also analyze a

consistent data since all of the selected memes are chosen from this one format of meme namely a text display meme so it should be easier to digest. With these gaps in mind, hopefully this piece of work extended the topic even more while also having the sense of uniqueness despite the fact that a similar topic has existed before.

## **2.2 Concepts**

The concept of this study refers to the idea that structured by the certain terminologies in order to make it easier to understand more about this study. These terminologies should be elaborated around the aspects of semiotics and internet memes.

### **2.2.1 Semiotics**

The most common understanding of semiotics is a study of signs. Eco provided one of his widest definitions of semiotics, saying that it concerns everything that may be interpreted as a sign (Eco, 1976). Semiotics is the study of anything that stands for something else in addition to the signs we commonly refer to in ordinary conversation. Words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects can all serve as signs in a semiotics sense. Since signs include meaning inside them, they may also be seen as an investigation into how reality within meanings are created and represented.

### 2.2.2 Verbal and Visual Sign

According to Chandler, he believes that verbal sign can be defined as something that deals with texts and words. This implies that most likely in the context of sign, a verbal sign is a sign that can be understood by reading the sign. On the other hand, a visual sign generally refers to a picture (Chandler, 2001). By picture it means that the sign can be observed through a certain visualization of graphics within the sign itself. Both verbal and visual signs can be seen on many different mediums such as words, images, sounds, gestures, objects and internet meme.

### 1.2.3 Internet Meme

As the background and limitation of the study had emphasized above, the concept of memes has been slightly shifted from its origin into more modernize form without removing its own essence. Therefore instead of meme, this study should focus on its modern form which is Internet meme. Internet meme is commonly seen as jokes from person to person via the Internet which shared norms and values are constructed through digital alteration such as edited images (Shifman, 2013). Internet memes are considered as semiotic signs because all forms of mediated content that convey meaning.

### 1.2.4 9gag

According to their website at <https://9gag.com>, the website claim that the creator defined 9gag as the largest meme community on the internet. They want

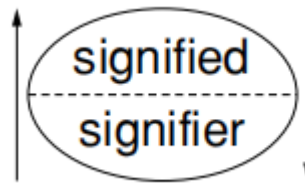
to create a place for people to discover the latest memes to share and grow their meme collection. The website was established in 2008 by a group of Hong Kong students from the University of Hong Kong with the intention of creating an alternative online platform to email on which users could easily share humorous photos or videos. These days, *9gag* has transformed into a giant meme sharing platform that has successfully gained fifty eight millions of followers while has posted over thirty thousands of internet memes as the study conducted.

### **2.3 Theories**

When it comes to the plan of analyzing the data, there are two based theories that should efficiently guide and support the study. These theories should help this study to interpret the meaning within the selected internet memes from *9gag*.

#### **2.3.1 Theory of Semiotics**

Saussure's paradigm for a sign is comparatively conventional. It focuses on the range of sign in linguistics. A sign, according to him, is made up of a signifier and a signified. Here is an image of how his concept would look in order to get better visualization.



**Figure 2.1 Saussure's Model of Sign**

Contemporary, the sign's shape is known as the signifier, and the thought referring to the sign is known as the signified. The distinction is made by Saussure in a few phrases. A linguistic sign is a combination of a signified as an idea and a signifier as a sound pattern, not only as a link between an object and its name. The sound in the signifier is not an actual sound but it implies to something physical. This physical form is perceived by the listener. This sound pattern represents our sensory impressions as it can be referred to be a material. Thus, the sound pattern can be separated from the other component of a language. This other component is typically more conceptual (Saussure, 1983).

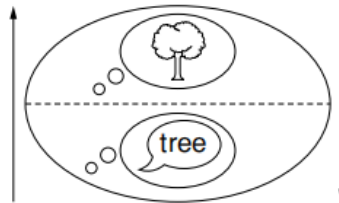
Here is one of a simple example of the implication in a sign, let's say there is the word 'open' on a restaurant's doorway. In Saussure's perspective, the sign should be divided as first, a signified which can be interpreted as the idea of how the restaurant is open for business; and second, a signifier which refers to the word 'open' (Saussure, 1983). in short, the definition of signifier and signified can be summarized as follows:

1. Signifier : concept or idea of something.
2. Signified : physical appearance of something.

The signifier and the signified were exclusively psychological in Saussure's view. He illustrates a sign as something that constructed by signifier and signified. Just



like the two side of a coin, these two elements cannot be separated. The reason why these two aspect of sign only work as one union because it tend to be ambiguous, which Saussure wanted to avoid this by all means.



**Figure 2.2 Concept and Sound Pattern**

He also notices when it come to sign as a vessel of human communication, there are two aspect existed within every signs that convey meaning within them which are the layer of signifier and signified. Those are verbal and visual signs. According to Chandler, he stated that verbal sign can be defined as something that deals with texts and words. On the other hand, visual sign generally refers to a picture (Chandler, 2001).

### **2.3.2 Theory of Meaning**

When it comes to meaning, it was left to later theorists to provide an account of this crucial aspect of meaning because Saussure's model of the sign prioritized denotation above connotation (Barthes, 1967). Barthes appreciated Saussure's viewpoint while extending the idea that connotation and denotation can be separated analytically. When it comes to the analogy, if what is photographed is the denotation, then how it is photographed is the connotation

(Barthes, 1964). In essence, the terminology used to define the relationship between signifier and signified are denotation and connotation. The level of representation or degree of meaning that Barthes (1964) used to characterize denotation and connotation can be defined as follows:

### **1. Denotation**

Barthes defining denotation as a sign level that embrace the sense of direct meaning. Denotation itself is the most common sign in our society since it was based on the literal meaning. The denotative can also be used to refer to what the dictionary seeks to define in the case of linguistics. Based on Barthes' viewpoint, the denotation can be seen on all things considered. For example, the photographic language is not unlike certain languages which mix analogical and specifying units, the difference being that the ideogram is experienced as a sign where as the photographic 'copy' is taken as the pure and simple denotation of reality within communication. In addition, the product of denotation can be called as a denotative meaning.

### **2. Connotation**

Meanwhile, the connotation is a sign level which correlate the idea of connection between signifier and signified that did not have explicit meaning. The meaning of a word under the influence of connotation typically did not have a literal meaning which has many layers of factors on how that could possibly

happened at the very first place. Here, an image's meaning is not dependent on its creator; rather, it can have a variety of interpretations depending on the audience, each of which refers to the sign's societal and individual connotations. The interpreter's class, age, gender, ethnicity, and other factors are frequently involved. It means that, when it comes to interpret something, it is most likely a human subjectivity of seeing something. Continuing on the example from the denotation segment, in order to find this code of connotation of the word language, the example would be structured all the 'historical' elements of the photograph, all the parts of the photographic surface which derive their very discontinuity from a certain knowledge on the reader's part, or, if one prefers, from the reader's cultural situation. Just like denotation that produce denotative meaning, the product of connotation can also be called connotative meaning.

Furthermore, levels of representation or levels of meaning are frequently used to express connotation and denotation. According to Barthes, there are various levels of signification. The denotation level is the first level, where a sign is made up of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a second-order meaning that connects an additional signified to the denotative sign (Barthes, 1957). According to this idea, a connotation is a sign that is derived from a denotative sign's signifier so denotation leads to a chain of connotations. This implies that the idea has a fundamental meaning (Barthes, 1977).

This is how signals can appear to imply one thing while actually having several different meanings. Different meanings may result from changes in style or tone, for as when using different typefaces for the exact same text or

switching from sharp focus to soft focus when snapping a picture. Not all paradigmatic dimensions apply to connotation. When a signifier appears among other signifier in a text, its implications are influenced in part by those other signifier. Despite the fact that both connotations and denotations are subject to historical circumstances as well as sociocultural diversity, connotative values are frequently viewed as denotative facts because of this (Fiske,1982).

